

Tales of The Miller

by Markdoon

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Summary: Mayor Dodge leads his townsfolk to survive the rigors of a rapidly changing world.

1. Chapter 1 A New Start

Tales of The Miller

by Mayor Dodge, Bogusville

circa: 5th year of Our Lord

Mayor Dodge

Bob the rancher/farmer/grocer

Juice the apothecary

Balmy the thaumaturge

Hrothgar the watchman

Manger the mason

Lars the bricklayer

Ben the miller

Derringer the hermit

Chapter 1 Tales of the Miller

I, Mayor Dodge, spent half of a shade circuit looking at the works beyond the walls of Bogusville. From the watchman's walkways, atop the outer walls and at the peak of the watchtower, I assessed the extent and purpose of works being done.

Whoever were these builders, laboring earnestly on the flank of the hill, northwest from town? How mysterious were their comings and goings? What great design was the Spirit fulfilling by bringing them here, and to what end did that involve us few survivors, at Bogusville?

For two days, I watched, not intruding nor guessing that they waited audience at my town. They came and went from Bogusville, never speaking to us, rarely seen and less heard, staying overnight at the inn which I kept. By morning light, each person of that company would be gone, back to the build upon which they labored so patiently.

Using axes and spades and brute force, those workers had cleared a swath of terrain. The cleared area ran from the west mount to the north forest flat. Two days, several men of skills, and nary a word hello nor a waved hand in passing. The Spirit and Our Lord and Savior work in mysterious ways, indeed.

At dawn of the third day, I counted their advance and beheld a waterway from a small high lake being fed into their works. That stream fed our north canal, at the foot of town's rise and along eastward to disappear into a hole. Now, the stream went straight in steps down the mount's flank, following a carved stone ditch flanked by stone brick. Straddling said ditch were four pairs of stone supports benched to receive pillow blocks. Beyond each pair, to the north, rose starkly bright sandstone walls of a meter thick, featuring doorway portals without door nor frame.

High above our lowland town, at the lake's edge, I discerned more stonemason handiwork carving ways from abutments. Directly west and above the stairway of water, those masonry works had scoured away landscape. I need go higher to espy the extent of lakeside works, for the watchtower's peak was below even that lake's edge.

Taking sword and bow, as is my custom, I went southward. At the opposite side of town from the strange works, I beheld our townsfolk's work. They were isolating the outer walls, for now it stood atop plateau of stone.

This is whence the Spirit brought our town, just five days past. Fully six meters above all surrounding terrain. The lowest part of our town stood safe from high waters and gave room for dry basement and furnaces below my inn. And waters there were in plenty, from a large lake and links by river to the east, over to natural canals northeast and also several lakes to the south and southwest. Only this large stone table stood between the waters and the mount which rose high above town, on our west and northwest.

Going down the southern flank, I turned west. Thinking to approach the mount by way of a scouted path, I found Juice, our apothecary, at work with Balmy, the thaumaturge. They were hacking away the forest, digging footing for a road. That road would encircle the town's rise. Passing by these men with words of praise and encouragement, I went on up the eastern flank of Westmount, as we named the hill on that day.

Threading my way through birch and oak, I mounted the southerly ridge of that hill. Forward from me, to the west, lay dark oak forest. Both the wood and the shade of its dense canopy were dark. It lay west and

also north at a western rise beyond the high lake. My choice was either to climb this spine of the mount or sidle around to the western flank. I chose to do neither.

Climbing into the upper branches of a lower oak, I leapt upward for one meter, to gain hold of a higher spot. Proceeding thus, I made my way to stand atop the great dark forest's roof. Being spritely and full of confidence, I ran and hopped, from treetop to treetop. Quickly, I crossed the edge of the western dark forest and soon came to the bench around the high lake.

The peak of Westmount rose to my east, now between me and my town. Ahead of me, to the north, rose the unnamed humps bounding the mountain lake on its east and west. Between those humps, north of the lake, rose a stony brick wall of considerable size, made by the newcomers. The small little lake now was growing, fed by two streams sprouting from the stone humps.

Spying for men at work, along the east of the lake, I beheld little of use. It was as if they planned no further works around the deepening lake. All their efforts now were upon that swath of carved slope, eastward of the lake.

Going to the lake's edge, I beheld a stony brick road and rock surrounding the water. It was plain that wagons could be used, but neither wagon nor dray animal could be seen, nor tracks of either did show. The Spirit and the Eggs of Creation could bring animals hither, for we townsfolk had those. I assumed that we are not alone in being so trusted by Our Lord and King.

Continuing along, scouting the land and the living things to the north and west, I went as far as a northwestern mountain plain. Looking back upon the wall now bounding the reservoir, I knew that the lake was gone. It lay beneath water now held in control by the masons. The fallacy of might not being right was all the clearer. Only the succeeding endeavors of gods and men made the world right and fit for living. Losers would forever argue the injustice of being made victim, as if any mortal emerged victorious over death, except for Our Lord.

Die, he did, and die, we shall, each and all. Some by weakness, others by choice and courage. Only those faithful at the end of Earth's last age escaped the mortal death, yet even they shall return to wage war. That shall come at the end of this last of times in creation. For now, the world is made new by the coming of Our Lord and King, and old things are not remembered. Only the Word and blood prevail. Amen.

I scouted on eastward, leaving that sparse mountain plain, and took life away from several beasts of The Foe. They lurked or went about their ways, benign to each other for the most part, yet always at odds with the scent of man. Were I just passing through, I would have left them be, but these enemies would come at night to attack the town. Some even came during day, to linger and to await victims. Most of all, I feared the witches, for they hurled ill potions and great hate towards us so that resistance faltered. Them, most of all, I kept arrows at the ready to dispatch.

Monsters do not fall easily, except for great spiders falling to arrows. The rest of the evils always take two if not three strikes to

head and heart, even from a sorcerer's bow. Quick and many, the monsters muster to the attack. They allow little or no time for second and third strikes upon one without risking death by another that approaches. If they were townsfolk, I would approve of tactics, but as I am one of few survivors there is little I admire about being mobbed.

Perhaps the strangers whose works now straddle the mountain stream could be useful in a fight. Our Lord knows that they have survived a long journey over hostile lands to arrive at this place. The Spirit transports as he will, never with a road nor leaving any trail, for those are works of mere men. Nor has the Spirit spoken a leading to the surviving townsfolk. We knew nothing about the purposes or the manner of the men now carving out a workplace in the wilderness.

A man only controls that which he may lay hand upon, or at most far that which he sees within a few steps. All other living and undead things regenerate when a man passes far away or returns and comes near. The monsters I dispatched were temporary inhabitants of each allotted piece of terrain. Their kind, or even a few benign animals, generate to fill that locale after my passing. Endless tides of war await the unwary, for they are untiring and endless in number.

I passed through a spruce forest, north from town. Holding northeast from the newcomer's works, I chanced upon a deeply trenched route, parallel to the town's north wall. It was straight but unfinished in any sense, marking a way to make better works soon to follow. The forest shade hastened nightfall to come quickly, and I sped the remaining thirty meters to the town's skirt.

"Hail, traveler!" Juice called out from a wall parapet. "Aye! It is our own foolish mayor who travels unescorted through woodland ways, coming upon night!"

"Aye, it is I, jester!" I called out as the gateway door opened.

"There were neither wall nor door transported here," Hrothgar mentioned as he closed the door behind me. "Did we not notice that more went missing than just animals? Four town clocks, from the lamppost in the square, are gone!"

"Those could have been borrowed, by our new neighbors," I replied, checking my arrows, tools, and inventory. Nothing was left behind for the monsters to use during an attack.

"Borrowed, what went missing?" Hrothgar growled. "They were not there at the time of looking, when first we arrived to retake our town. I have looked under your inn, and in the stores, under Manger's masonry house, and even in loft above the dÃ©cor storage."

"How about above the smithy?" I wondered. "The baled hay that waits to catch flame, above the furnace, might hide undiscovered treasures."

Hrothgar shook his head slowly, resigned to being misunderstood. Juice laughed at his discomfort, descending from the wall to speak further.

"The bales stay safe, fully five meters above any flame, but they

would be safe at three," Juice intoned. "Thus far, only the fireworks of the stray bangers spread four meters from their source. I have made wider spray from potions applied to fireballs. Still, that does not ignite straw nor any living thing that it touches. Fire spreads only near to lava, at this point."

"You and Balmy will ignite the town!" I stated with a mix of exasperation and a bit of humor.

"Night comes full," Hrothgar stated, motioning for Juice to calm down. "I'll be up top, should you have need."

"Those flaming arrows, from your sorcerer's bow, also do not cause materials to burn," I said, to the watchman. "They ignite only living and undead things, but not materials."

"Better than that," Juice spoke with a wry grin, walking me towards the inn. "If Balmy's spell has worked, the arrows from Hrothgar's bow should now cause the foes to burn unto death."

"Now?" I looked around at the streets we passed by, seeking danger in disguise or any form, my sword in hand.

"Now, since the spell is doubly powerful," Juice stated. "Balmy works wonders upon our tools and weapons, ye dodger, and have ye seen what come of works for the road surrounding this burg?"

"That is your handiwork, to the north, a trench hiding under the trees?" I asked as we stopped and talked under the overarching inn structure which spanned two town blocks.

"That is ours, but not for us only," Juice nodded as he looked to the east and west, beyond either end of the archway.

"Let us go in, to our inn," I grinned at the news about the road's intended use.

"The neighbors be all asleep, by this time," Juice backed into the inn, closing the door behind us.

I looked at the booths and tables around the innkeeper's counter. Lifting a gate to enter the kitchen, I nodded at Juice in agreement.

"They sleep quick and rise early," Juice said without emotion. "Spirit feeds them, do you think?"

"Conscription reduces hunger, restores health, repairs damage," my monotone listed common knowledge of Spirit workers while my hands checked drawers and a lone kitchen oven.

"Yea, but two bangers ganged on their lowest workplace, at about midday, and a zombie without kin stood watch," Juice warned. "It watched, Dodge. That is unusual, that it watched, neither attacking nor seeking refuge."

"Unusual, but nothing new," I replied, thrusting a couple of raw chicken into the oven. "One coal; more than enough for our dinner. Have ye other that needs to be cooked?"

"Waste not," Juice agreed, pulling some uncooked goods from his pack. "I must be off to bed, eating on the run."

"How is sleep, since Bob's barns are empty?"

"The silence is disturbing, but I discovered that I worried overly much about the former noises covering the approach of monsters," the apothecary confided. "It was never a problem, although a few lurked about under the arch between his place and my own. We put torches in place, to light the area, but they always had refuge in some nook, cranny, or outside, in the field."

Taking chicken from the oven, I served it up while thrusting the other items in to cook. I didn't want Juice to hurry away to bed. We needed to talk.

"The mountain lake is made a reservoir," I explained. "There is now a wagon route around that, and there are two springs feeding the reservoir."

"The mage's opinion is that waterwheels will be finished within two days," said the apothecary. "The added thrust of water flow can power as many wheels as they can align, between Westmount and the river."

"Resistance to flow will increase over distance, unless they bury any other devices deeper into the ground," I replied. "There is that unmapped hole, where the water goes underground, just east of the north gate."

"Underground waterwheels?" Juice stayed, his hand reaching for the door, while he showed renewed interest. "Whatever do you imagine these wild schemes of strangers?"

"Unless the waterwheels only work in daylight, and not in rain nor darkness, the option to move the works underground is logical," I explained. "There would be less interference by monsters, for one thing."

"The monsters do not interfere with the works of these men," Juice repeated a theme of concern. "Bangers and zombies do them little harm; spiders wander all about but do little nuisance. Skellies actually provoke the men to action. A dark walker took no blocks, but it watched with interest, as did that zombie."

With a flourish of quick hands, I took the hot food out of the oven. Handing it over, but not letting it go easily, I looked into my friend's eyes with honest concern. The sleepers, above us and away to rooms on the other side of the arch, could have listened to all that we said.

The dark and silent night that awaited Juice beckoned him to leave. Hrothgar on watch, high above, would sing out if danger exceeded his abilities. Bob, the rancher, was already at home, comfortable with his home-cooked meals.

"Have you seen Manger?" the apothecary asked. "Never saw nor heard him, out in the field, or in town."

"I haven't seen Manger since we returned," I admitted. "He wasn't

back at the judgment area, when I got the dogs. Neither have I seen evidence of his work along the ways, going and coming."

"We all gathered together, beyond the wall, before coming into town, after it was moved," Juice persisted. "Manger was with us, Dodge."

"He was," I agreed. "Out there, he was, but did you see him come into town? We came, all of us in a group, climbed through the empty gateway, and we went about our business, but did anyone see Manger climb up the rise?"

With silent reappraisal, the apothecary stared at me. Five days and four nights had passed without word from our town's mason.

"Five days ago, the Spirit saved us and our work from the judgment upon that region," I reminisced. "We arrived here. Of the original eight, we six remain. Then, Manger has gone since when I left to get my dogs. Life began anew, and we six stood out there, in that forest. We had neither plan or unction to do a new work, as of when founding Bogusville. Now, five days later, you ask if I have seen Manger, today? When have you seen him, or talked to any other who saw our mason?"

The apothecary said nothing. He had not seen the mason, the same as none of them had noticed the missing gates and doors, the missing clocks. None of us knew what would become noticed.

"We must advance...build...do something," Juice said quietly. "What now, when we have works staring back? These others are being spirited away from their own places, to do conscription builds? We are not conscripted, either now or when we first met to agree upon lots together. What should we do, or learn of from the conscripts?"

"Lars was taken," I answered. "That is conscription, as far as I know."

"Cortez was a fine man, and his son Lars is equally valuable to our town," Juice said calmly. "Lars was traumatized, by his father's death. We all are, but he more than us all. The Spirit took himâ€"took from usâ€"an open wound. You are Lars' uncle, but cannot be a father since you saw your brother's end. At best, may you have become as a family of equals in suffering and achievements, but there was no way for your former life to persist. My potions offer healing, helps, and even some remedies, but for heartache I have nothing."

I spread my hands wide apart, palms upward, in a sign of acceptance of the inevitable. I was as powerless as any man to overcome loss.

"Had we been united as strangers, without kin, this would not be Bogusville, my friend," Juice continued. "Because you and your brother and his son came with us, at the founding, we cannot pretend to be family. It would be a pretense! For the time that Cortez was with us, we became close. Lars grew from a young teenager into a man, and that tie is a large part of our town growth together. As Lars grew, we each grew. At his taking we each suffered differently but more than if we had not become so entwined. Manger suffered the most, aside from you, because of kindred heart, I would say."

"Manger was kin, to Lars?" I asked, openly surprised. "I never knew."

"They share a spirit," Juice explained. "It is an oddity of men whose hands find strength in the earth. Lars was not much for the farm, or for the woodland, and certainly not for the stores and treasures. He took to following Manger, seeking secrets from underground, from stone, and especially from clay. I know because he asked me for potions of water breathing, so that he could stay longer while enjoying the clay molding within his hands."

"What of clay without being underwater?" I asked the obvious. "There is plenty of it, unearthed."

"That is not the same as working with it immersed, I guess," the apothecary replied. "Have you tried to do that, working with clay in water suspension, so that gravity and dehydration have no power?"

The idea was unique. I could see why it appealed to the apothecary, but it was not so enticing, for me.

Juice carefully exited from the inn. He waved at Hrothgar, trotted away to take his meal home. Bob, the rancher, waved through a window, so Juice called out a goodnight as he went home.

Standing inside of his apothecary, Juice looked over towards the mason's house, across the way. A perennial torch burned within, never extinguished, and there was no shadow of movement. If there were comings and goings of the mason, only Hrothgar, the watchman, might know of it.

Hrothgar studied the shades and shadows of night, the movement of eerie red eyes alight with evil beyond the walls. Most peculiar was the lack of monsters in proximity to the waterwheel builds. Rains came almost daily, and each night, so that much beyond the walls was not visible to Hrothgar. He kept watch for the sake of the townsfolk, only, and not for the sake of interest.

There were cyclical events, day and night, which measured time. Hrothgar knew that I would retire to the basement furnace area, under the south leg of the inn. That area was only accessible via a ladder from the kitchen, at the north leg of the inn. Sleepers would be above the north and south legs, and also on the ground floor of the south part.

To the south of the inn, in a tall house behind a cobblestone wall, there were villagers bred for pure interest. Coming from Eggs of Creation, the two villies had thus far generated two offspring. Those little ones had been the first and only children in the history of Bogusville. The unending hatred of the zombies for villagers riveted upon that location. Each day and night found zombies staring at the outer wall, seeking a way to turn the villies into zombies.

Hrothgar found relief in that zombie hatred. It forced zombies to focus upon the unreachable goal, behind walls and closed doors. That focus decreased the number of hostile mobs endangering townsfolk. The watchman kept sharper on the lookout for other monsters. There were flying bangers, dark walkers opening doors for other monsters to enter, skeletal archers seeking victims, and always the

witches.

Witches appeared with disturbing regularity, often by twos and threes. They kept a convention of sorts in the cleared waterfront area, rarely standing alone. Once in a while, Hrothgar was pleased to see an archer piercing other monsters. Something unknown could trigger an all-out war between them, and it was sobering to see that they never relented. Many foes always had to die before the fray ended.

The watchman surveyed the peaceful streets of Bogusville, minute by minute, and kept aware of matters. Once in a while, he unlimbered his great bow and shot a flaming arrow into a monster, fifty meters or further away. The rain kept snuffing out the flaming arrow, long before that arrow impaled a monster. With sufficient practice, Hrothgar was able to hit skellies in the back. They turned and fired at the nearest archer, starting a war. His unending supply of arrows from a mystical quiver kept the monsters busy, all night long.

Dawn's light found the visiting conscripts quietly going about their works. It was as if they either whispered or communed in Spirit to talk. Hrothgar maintained his vigil until the townsfolk resumed their daily affairs. He counted heads, as was good practice, knowing how many people had exited from town and how many should remain.

I awoke to the sounds of wreckage being made, above my head, but off to the south. It was not inside of my inn. I rolled away from the cot, coming up to rise with sword in hand. Grabbing up my backpack, I thrust my arms through the slings while going down the hall to the kitchen ladder.

"Mayor!" a voice yelled from the inn's archway.

I came out of the inn, on the run, sword leading the way.

"Whoa!" Hrothgar cautioned, sidestepping my egress route. "It's the villies! They got into a ruckus, inside of the cobble fence!"

"Zombie spawned?" I demanded, knowing that was foolish because of the high amount of lighting within the enclosure.

"Possible, if anyone dropped an egg into that bunch?" Hrothgar would not guess at how anything was possible.

"Break in!" I shouted to Bob, the rancher, who was approaching the fence with a pick in his hand. "Gate?"

Bob nodded, pitching a gate towards me, from his backpack. He swung his pickaxe into the cobblestone fence with a practiced motion, breaking away the space needed for a gate.

I shoved the gate into place, just as the internal racket silenced.

"Noticed us finally, did they?" Bob wondered aloud.

"Would you look?" Hrothgar demanded. "If that weren't the villagers, then it is still inside of their clutch!"

I went through the gate, leaving it for Bob to man. After opening a door, I went inside, half crouched and at the ready with sword to maim and kill.

"No villies on this floor!" I yelled out. "Heading around!"

Going around an internal set of walls which sported several doors, I began to search for the miscreant. Something other than villagers had caused the racket that roused me from sleep.

"Hole in the floor!" I yelled. "Watch your footing!"

Bob and Hrothgar exchanged a glance. Monsters did not tunnel, dig, or chop down things. They went where openings allowed, sometimes as small as half of a meter square, but they never made openings.

"Those builders are all out beyond the wall, at their own works," Hrothgar said with confidence. "This is something else."

I made a circuit of the bottom floor. There was just the one hole, so I began climbing stairs, intent upon finding the villagers, or their attacker.

"Dodge!" a somehow familiar voice echoed dimly, hollowly, from below.

The villagers were upstairs, ahead of me. They did not sound distressed. That other voice came from down at the hole in the floor. The villagers were alive; the other voice needed attention. I retraced my steps and looked down into the black hole.

"Who is it?" I demanded.

"Dodge!" the excited relief was clear. "It's me! Manger!"

"Manger!?" I demanded with mixed relief and curiosity. "What are you doing, down there?"

Weary laughter wafted upward. There was no saying whatever he felt, at this moment.

Hrothgar burst in, leaving Bob at the gate. He had to see this for his own eyes, and to explain something.

"Hrothgar is here!" I called down. "Do you need tools? Anything?"

"Yes!" Manger yelled. "Dump in water, or ladders! And a pickaxe! Mine broke, and I'm nearly dead of hunger! Again!"

"If that is Manger, then we have a problem with the count," Hrothgar said, with all sincerity. "Each day, I count heads, coming in and leaving. There has always been one more leaving than the first day after the builders came."

I was busily tossing tools and food down to the mason. Still, I listened to what the watchman said, but I did not slacken in aiding our missing friend.

"Who is that other person?" Hrothgar continued. "I tallied the beds at the inn, and the number of people leaving added to one more. If that is not one of us, then who is it, and where do they sleep?"

"They sleep in the spare bed, at the dÃ©cor building, or else in Mason's bed, in the masonry house," I replied easily. "Nobody is home, at either place, and since Cortez was killed, nobody took over the dÃ©cor building."

"Lars slept there, when he wasn't staying at your inn," Hrothgar mentioned.

"Off to bed, for you," I responded. "You and me, we sleep down at the inn, by shifts. It's your bedtime."

"I made a bed, at the armory, at the bottom of the watchtower, after the new people arrived," Hrothgar stated.

"Smart," I agreed. "I'll get Manger set up, and catch up with him on what kept him away. You go. We need you on watch, tonight."

Hrothgar left, passing Juice and Balmy, as they entered. With a nod that all was passably well, he went home. At the gate, Bob stared at Hrothgar and did wonder at the peculiar expression.

"Is that Manger, for real?" Bob asked.

"Sounds like it, to me," Hrothgar kept walking, going over to the dÃ©cor house that held chests of various items.

The three of us within the villager enclosure worked together, rescuing Manger from whatever trouble he had discovered. The important thing was the rescue, and not what prompted the mason to vanish for several days. We had each gone on adventures during our years together. Respect demanded space. Each man to come to grips with the consequences of decision before admitting to whatever foolhardy or wrongful thinking was responsible.

Manger worked his way up through the shaft, gaining help from us. The food was delicious, the vials of healthful potions divine, but foremost was the fact of coming home. The welcoming hearts and goodwill was more healing to Manger's spirits than his words could express.

"Bloody hole!" Manger spat at the dark depths which he exited.

"You're a bit bloodied, yourself, mate," Juice observed. "That must have been a fright of an episode."

"The water!" Manger gasped. "That stream, beyond the north wall, carried me all of the way down to Hades! What a mischief that work must have been, for The Foe!"

I glanced towards Juice, then to Balmy, saying nothing.

"We had presumed that you went on adventure, after Dodge left, to recover his dogs," Juice admitted.

"Dogs?" Manger blinked in the bright light, and sat down while grasping at another liter of drink. "You went back? Your dogs are here, now?"

"No, he went alone," Juice nodded towards me, watching Manger. "He brought the dogs back to midway, at a hamlet to the east. Monsters were peckish about our mayor traipsing across the countryside."

Manger gulped some more refreshment, then chewed thoughtfully upon some fruit. He looked over at the thaumaturge with invitation to speak.

"Those tools, and your weapons, are gone, I suppose?" Balmy inquired.

"Those are indeed gone, but not to worry, as I regained three times their weight in gems, iron, gold, and more," Manger stated. "Too bad that the only food in the caverns used to be mushrooms. I left with only enough wood to make four bowls, or two bowls and eight torches."

"You could have made a workbench," Balmy offered. "For what good without wood is a workbench? I cannot guess how the strain must have injured your spirit."

"Nay, the bench is expended, hereafter," Manger grinned widely, showing dust-stained teeth now gummy with fresh drink. "This rescue is not only for me, but for the lot of us, mates!"

"Come now, let's get out and repair the enclosure," I said, and led the way.

"That's not all!" Manger exclaimed, walking out into the rainy day, yet squinting against the comparable brightness.

"What is not all?" Bob demanded, pulling the mason through the gate and then hugging him in grand style. "Where have you been!? What have you seen?"

"Lars!" Mason exclaimed. "I saw Lars, in the flesh! He did not see me, for I was in the Spirit, but he is here! Now!"

"Here?" Dodge interrupted. "In town? Now?"

"Noâ€"yesâ€"maybe!" Manger stuttered, then he caught sight of Hrothgar. "Hey! Is Lars at home, in that building?"

Hrothgar shook his head, leaving the small house and walking to the armory. It was too soon in the day for tales and fables. He was going to rest and renew.

Manger pulled out a miniature stone replica of a crafting table, and then he tossed it at the large watchman.

Hrothgar deftly snatched the oncoming object from the air..and he stopped all movement. Transfixed by the immensity of what happened, Hrothgar did not see that each person watching him continued moving. They could not see what he was seeing...and neither could he move

without first breaking contact with the object.

"Just open your hand!" Manger called. "It will pocket itself, into your apron!"

Hrothgar slowly opened his hand. The view vanished and the item vanished into his backpack. He wore no apron, as of a blacksmith. Only Mayor Dodge wore such an apron, as did Manger.

"What wizardry is this?" Balmy wondered, coming closer to the watchman.

"That is a find!" Manger stated with glee. "One of many!"

Balmy stood divided. He wanted to see what the watchman possessed, to discern its workings. He also must see what else the mason had found.

"It is a wizardly small workbench, mage," Hrothgar said. "Not to lose sleep, for he has other trinkets to show."

"Aye, sleep well, good friend," Balmy said to the watchman, who already turned away and was going into the armory.

"Each of us each maintains watch, through the day," Balmy said, looking around at the townsfolk. "Yet that good fellow alone watches over us through the night, but he earns no special award from us?"

"Do not fret over a calling," I warned. "We each face calling to do alone what might strain the hearts of others. Your calling gifts you with abilities to do wizardry and metallurgy beyond our ken. Bob communes with animals to which we are all as dumb beasts. Juice concocts potions which transmute our abilities beyond mere humanity. Manger crafts stone yet calls us to witness stonework speaking to him before it is shaped, but none of us can hear. Lars was similarly gifted, before he was taken, but now..."

"He is here!" Manger insisted. "I saw him, working with those millers, beyond the walls."

"You saw in the Spirit," I clarified. "The sight in the Spirit is of what god sees, in and out of time, and may be entirely different than the time within which we are constrained to exist."

"What did you see?" Balmy inquired.

"He is trained to bricklaying, stonemason, and artful works of clay," Manger said with obvious happiness. "Lars is surpassing me!"

I felt surprised by pride in my nephew's achievement. More than that, I was astonished at being warmed by Manger's happiness. It was as if hearing my brother's voice speaking from beyond death, approving of Lars' growth.

"You were gone," I pointed out. "You have returned. Lars was here, but none saw this, and now that you are here, will he return?"

"Go out, to see him!" Manger urged. "He is there, working with the milling crew of builders!"

"Yes, I suppose that formality makes it my duty, but you are more a father or role model than me" I said with calm deliberation. "You should welcome him back, for each of us."

Manger saw anew why they had appointed me to be mayor. There was a kind of distance between my person and role that enabled me to separate my emotions from duties. Blood relatives are exceedingly rare, and after losing an only brother, standing aside from welcoming my nephew was unexpectedly selfless of me.

I did not feel like being selfless. I felt like finding a quiet place to adjust to being in an undefined state of shock.

"Not before he shares his tale with us!" Balmy insisted. "We must see what our friend has gained, and learn what he has to teach!"

That we did, and so Manger set out to tell his tale. We worked together all that day, for the sake of hearing once what would otherwise be repeated. Going first with Bob, to hatch and to feed new animals from the Eggs of Creation, we kept our hands busy. The mason told a tale and explained his discoveries. There were questions beyond number, though we tried to restrain them.

By day's dusk, we each had wearied the teacher whose fatigue already laid claim over his senses. Juice's ministrations kept Manger alert and unwearied for long after his body would have fallen. After having opened unto us his backpack of baubles, gems, and treasures, and explained many things. With that done, the mason fell off into the relentless sleep reserved for grand heroes.

Lars came into town, that night, and went straight to sleep. As we had deduced, he slept in his father's place, the carpenter's house of decorations. Since we remained quite busy catching up with all of Manger's discoveries, and also needed sleep, we went to bed without disturbing the bricklayer.

The following morn, after breaking my fast, I climbed the watchtower. My head reeled from the exceeding amount of knowledge and changes coming upon our locality.

Manger's trip down the water slide into oblivion had ended at the deep of our known world, seventy meters below the town. He wandered to and fro, within the earth, skirting lava and dangers of many kinds. The thirst for knowledge of that arcane skill called masonry soon left him without food. Manger was not accustomed to fainting from hunger, thus each episode gave him fresh vigor without resurrection to the surface.

It seemed as if the mason's trip went south of the norm, guiding his feet to ways untrod by men. He found many dangers, dungeons, engines of destruction and also mysterious items the like of which apothecary and thaumaturge alike labored to study and discern purpose and means. Little of use to common men, like myself, was brought back, except for two items of storage value.

The one item, which Hrothgar kept, was a ready workbench in pocket edition, as if packing around a workbench were to become a normal task. It was very useful, without doubt. Balmy was certain that he could make out its manner of function, to give to each of us.

The other find of significance to me was a two-piece storage chest which held nothing. Both of the chests could be broken, yet neither would lose the items kept safe within them. I doubted this so strongly that I insisted upon a test, and Balmy was first and foremost against losing such a treasure. We settled upon using one of his sorcery tools which broke blocks without dividing apart their constituent contents. The test resolved only that his tool worked without damaging the chest's ingredients.

I challenged Manger's claim by building one of the chests, using the new one at some distance without associating it to the others. My friends stayed with me, to see it for themselves, and thus we sacrificed a rare item of our treasury. The Eye of Ender, it was called, came by way of uniting the eye of a black walker with an arcane rod fallen from a blazing spirit cast out into the depths of Hades. Balmy had learned the secret of making such eyes, and needless to say they were beyond rare. Manger described them as the one essential ingredient for the new chest, surrounded by eight chunks of obsidian.

Lo, and behold! The new chest was able to access the other chests, from far away!

Balmy made another chest, of course, and we found a greater mystery. All that Balmy had put into the chest of his design did not appear to me, or to any other man, but only to the one who held that chest! Bob, first, and then Juice, also looked into my ender chest, and into Balmy's chest, and also into the first set of chests which Manger had discovered.

The great change that this enabled was for each of us to fill the new chest with other chests. Twenty-seven chests full of treasures, tools, weapons, and foods could be carried in one slot in a backpack inventory. The entire village could be dismantled and rebuilt, all from one ender chest!

All of the sixth day, since relocation, we made headway into studies of Manger's treasure. Still, we worked, questioned, prodded and surmised, not stinting about any of our duties. The former works outside of the walls, by Juice and Balmy, had gone very well. Now, with the added aids of Manger's efforts, they were able to largely finish four legs of roads, all during one day!

The enlargement of Bogusville's success led me to call an early halt. Choosing to worship Our Lord and Savior, for the remainder of sunlight until day's close, we sat in the town's round square, by the smithy.

"Mayor Dodge, would you be so kind as to retrieve the Bogusville Ledger, from the archives of Balmy?" Manger requested. "I do believe that it is time for our company to register a note of thankfulness."

"I agree," I said, but I paused just before I strode away to the mage's abode, beyond the grocer's structure.

"Why do ye walk, old man?" Balmy called out with good humor. "Can we not get all the books of my domain in this central town chest, of Manger's design?"

I paused, scowling at my friends, looking to see if the jest was a test.

"Hrothgar, the Watchman, who oversees our safety each night, keeps central care over the armory," Balmy stated. "In there, behind locked doors, under arms and armor, stays the town chest, courtesy of Manger, the Mason."

To gain access to Balmy's upper library was no small trip. I would pass through a visibly scant door made of acacia wood, step upon a trap that would close and lock said door. Thereafter, the only exit was up a narrow stair, to another trap, and another door which only Balmy could open from the inside. I could go in, but not get out, except for going down another stairway into a basement and out through a portal into Hades. That would be no escape. If I bypassed the second trap, and climbed yet another stair up to the library and enchantment area, two more traps awaited, each at a door. Were I to find and take the book or any item from shelves, the traps below would reset. Balmy was among the least trusting of all humans, yet also very adept in his arcane ways.

"I expect not to find the town's ledger, is why," I admitted to the waiting audience. "Not only did the relocation remove our barriers or gates, for they were not left behind in the judgment area, it removed clocks and fixtures, torches and pictures. In fact, that relocation literally started over our personal history, at this point. There is not one thing here of relevance to the former life, at that other region, except that we pretend to make it that way."

"Correction, there is one thing returned," Manger disagreed.
"Lars."

"Still, his life is made new, as are each of ours, for we were translated from that place to this," I argued. "Our calling remains, which he was just discovering. It is plain that his calling transformed into conscription. That call to duty far excels our pace of self-discovery, until your return from robbing the spirits of the underworld."

"Let us see," Balmy interjected, halting the discussion. He pulled out from his backpack the rare item of his own, his ender chest.

"I placed herein copies of all my tomes, many works, tools, essences and other manner of thingsâ€"but just copies," Balmy warned. "The originals remain in their place, secured behind doors and disguises, copied in entirety by spells and by means of discernment of the Spirit."

"Mayor, you can read the script of the Spirit's alphabet, it is true?" Manger said, by way of question, to verify what each of the members knew.

"Yes, but I am not the wizard of combining the terms into spells, such as our apothecary and thaumaturge are called to do," I replied, still not moving from my walk towards Balmy's townhouse.

"There was occasion, on my haunted journey, to make out inscriptions upon not a few dungeons and ways," Manger continued. "I recall thinking, at such times, that I would rather be aided by your skills

as a warrior than by these gentlemen in their specialties."

I nodded, neither agreeing with his assessment or choice. He should continue to describe what linked this subject with Balmy's experiment.

"There are things of which I saw, and some that I did damage, but I could not bring them back while in their assigned form," Manger gestured his hands about as if helpless. "They are sometimes good fortune, other times not, and often it came about that I must stand away, at arm's reach, before touching them off. In the words of Juicy, the conflagration. There might be explosions, triggering of traps and devices, even to birthing from Eggs of Creation the animals and bogeymen which we are not privileged to see, upon our domain."

"Were such things a challenge to a mason, whose communing with stone and earth should not be surprised?" I wondered aloud.

"Yea," the mason groaned slowly, not desiring to agree. "Still, those things are scattered, hither and yon, below the lands which we trod. Their design is not of man's doing, nor can only masons find such treasure and unspeakable dangers being unleashed."

"What do you mean?!" I asked somewhat sharply. "You're hinting that others than men might be here, below us, around us, loosing things which we lack the means to battle?"

Manger nodded once, deeply, emphasizing the truth.

"Let us say, firstly," Balmy interrupted, "that Mayor Dodge's perception is quite sharp. The town's ledger is no longer in my library."

Bob, Juice, Manger, and now Hrothgar stood to look about. They looked not at Balmy, who failed to safeguard the town's volumes, but first they looked at me, then elsewhere.

"The Spirit does as pleases Our Lord," I stated, absolving Balmy of blame. "The nuances of dealing with all ill-mannered entities of creation are its own labor, not ours."

"The Spirit took the town's books?" Juice scowled openly.

"The Spirit is more to our side than we admit, doing many works," I said with thankful words, "Unearthly items of which Manger speaks are not of The Foe, lest we should encounter only grief and deception, but of the Spirit, requiring faith and courage. You wonder at this, yet Bob decries the loss of nineteen parts of each animal? Manger described how several such things and stacks of steaks, eggs, and other foods fell from the blocks which he broke. I suggest that he was shown on the one hand where these portions are gone."

Hrothgar looked closely at Bob, as if seeing something new in the eyes of an old friend. The watchman said nothing, but his look then shifted to stare upon man after man, finally coming to rest upon me.

"Mayor," Hrothgar began. He said no more.

"Continue, if you must," I said.

"I should," Hrothgar agreed. "You said 'on the one hand' about Manger's block or whatever it is to be called. What lies on the other hand?"

"On the other hand," the words came too easily to my lips, "Bob's analysis is made the more true with Manger's discovery. It is not merely us whose works are feeding wealth into those strange things. It could be foolish for us to presume several things."

"Several meaning that other people are involved," Hrothgar said.

"Indeed," I agreed. "To continue, I say that it is foolish to presume that such blocks are for us, alone. It is foolish to suppose that they exist only locally. We must also not believe that once the local supply is discovered and exhausted that our safety would increase, or that this new wealth would dry up."

"The spigot is open for all to drink from," Hrothgar made a simile.

"Here is what I see, among my armored brethren," I described. "I see men who take danger for granted, but not greater dangers than they have faced. We live while others died from lack of preparation, lack of courage, and generally by lacking what is required."

"Now, the evidence of Manger's adventure shows that we face higher risks," I continued. "There are greater weapons, superior potions, and immortal enemies which spawn relentless troops whose armament is above anything fielded by surface minions. Repairing the gates cannot halt all of these things. Neither will abandoning those workers outside the walls to this unknown fate bring us close to Our Lord and King."

"Let us go, to see Derringer," Hrothgar suggested.

"Indeed, that is wise," I agreed. "Bob, you should also come along."

The rancher knew what was being planned. He shook his head, resigned that this inevitable time had come.

"It is needful," Hrothgar stated, looking at Bob. "You hold all Eggs of Creation, of this town, in safekeeping."

"They are safe," Bob assured his friends. "I check them, twice, each day."

"Would somebody clarify what is being planned, for me?" a younger voice rose to the discussion. "I only just returned, and have been busy all the day long, but if you're risking life and limb for us, I deserve to know."

The standing group turned and looked upon Lars, who had arrived unnoticed, as the sun was setting. We saw a different young man than the teenager whom we used to know, but he was truly Lars, of Bogusville.

"It is evening, on the sixth day," Lars continued. "I need not sleep right away, for we do not work on the seventh, except to do good."

"Welcome home!" Manger shouted for all the assembled townsfolk, and with that he strode over to Lars and hugged him soundly.

A chorus of agreement rose and then calmed. The men gathered around Lars, expressing thankfulness for his return. Nobody remarked upon the other silent men who passed quickly along, going to bed or to whatever fulfilled their spirits on this night.

I held back, waiting until the end of merriment. Stepping forward, I offered my hand or a hug, depending on Lars to choose. He took both.

"There!" Lars laughed aloud, breaking away, "Now tell me! What do you intend, or shall I forsake this home for another?"

"Ye conscript of the Spirit!" I chuckled hoarsely. "Yer home is with Our Lord and King, but ye rest in family, here. We owe you welcome, and allegiance if it comes to that. Why endanger your calling for a few dogs and animals?"

"Why?" Lars looked confused. "Our dogs? Your dogs? Your horse?"

"Yes, those that survived the battle, from thence unto Derringer," I agreed.

The news visibly discomfited Lars. He looked simultaneously concerned and a bit afraid, but somehow angry, also.

"There was no word, to me, about battles, and losses," Lars explained. "Only that the Spirit had moved the town to this location, as refuge from judgment falling upon that region."

I nodded, understanding now the confusion of what was real versus what he had expected. Standing here, in the center of a relocated town, with renewed people on a new calling for Our Lord, some explanations were needful.

"Had I not returned to the dogs, they would remain, perhaps unharmed," I said by way of explanation. "My emotional tie of trust and loyalty compelled me to go back. I risk everything that I am in order to prove that their trust in me was not in vain. Had there been no monsters, no opposition from terrain and nature, it would have been a lark. I expected to fight, going and coming, but I was wrong."

"Wrong how?" Lars interrupted. "There was no fight?"

"The fight was too great, both on the way and even fiercer on the return," said I, without remorse. "Two of the dogs fell before I got the horse, and then there was another that I abandoned while saving the rest. That was on the second day of the adventure. On that eve, I made kennel, at Derringer. From there, I returned afoot, alone, until strong enough to make way again."

With a thoughtful pause, Lars looked around at his family of

townsfolk. Though he said nothing, the silence spoke quite loudly.

"We had only just arrived, here," Juice explained. "When it became clear that none of the animals had been relocated, Dodge went to find out what had become of them. We were discombobulated by that event, returning to this village which was empty of all life, except for the two villagers and their kids."

"I wasn't here," Manger intoned. "I was busy falling down the waterway, into the underworld, on the north, while Dodge was heading south."

"So, just the four of you remained, against the monsters?" Lars wondered. "Two men gone, and the four of you survived, for how long?"

"Until now, young fellow," Hrothgar said.

"I meant how did you survive, in this isolated area, surrounded by forest and monsters, not being conscripted?" Lars specified his interest. "How did Mayor Dodge get all the way back to that region, alive, on his own?"

"There is the regional route, which he followed, I believe," Hrothgar said with a shrug. "The battles coming back are the real mystery, to me. It seems that if we bring the dogs and horses, then the monsters throng together on the attack in greater number. That is the risk which he delayed us from facing, by kenneling up at Derringer."

"You're saying that if he had brought the dogs back, all of the way, a wave of monsters would have flung against the gates," Lars summarized.

"There were no gates," Hrothgar stated. "For two days and nights, we stood at the gateways, and fought off monsters trying to enter. Forty-three giant spiders, in one day, I shot from the walls!"

"But spiders cannot climb over the outer barriers!" Lars exclaimed. "That is the way you designed them!"

"There were no gates," Hrothgar repeated. "No doors, no frames, and spiders do not come in alone. They bring skeletal warriors, and witches!"

"Witches," Lars almost gulped.

"Witches," Hrothgar nodded while repeating the fact. "Juice saw a small zombie riding a spider, also, on the first night."

"A chicken jockey, on a spider?" Lars truly was surprised.

"Yes, and so now we muster our courage to bring home the pack, to make way through the wilderness!" Hrothgar explained.

"You have eggs," Lars persisted. "You said that you have creation eggs. You can make more wolves, and tame them, right here."

I chuckled, turning away from the pointless discussion. The tomes of

the town were gone. History was not just being restarted; it was over. Each day was a new setting with unforeseen changes to realities.

Lars spared a glance towards me. He looked more closely at the men whom he used to know, seeing differences in their faces and spirits. Everyone had been changed, more than was expected.

"How old shall we be, by the middle of this last of ages?" Lars asked.

Balmy looked appreciatively at the newly returned young man. There was much that they could discuss, but this night was already growing thick, and no man stood watch upon the walls.

"Tomorrow, we set out, for Derringer!" Hrothgar stated decisively. "Bob, I am up top, if you need me."

I did not stay for the unceremonious call to sleep. The party surely divided and went their separate ways, one-eighth of the way into the night shades.

My reason for walking away, leaving them in discussion, was to take advantage of the opportunity. Hrothgar would go up in the tower, on watch, while I tarried, and the risks of exposure increased.

Going around the grocer's home, passing by Balmy's house, I passed from view of the townsfolk. Ascending the wall at the northwest corner, I dropped over and down. Rolling to my feet to absorb the fall, I gained speed going down the slope, leapt across the canal, and gained cover.

The cover was none other than the beginning shape of a waterwheel, without the paddles yet, outside of the lowest walled structure. I found no room for a way up between the wheel and the build, so I climbed up to the wall's top. Still behind the large wooden wheel, I hurried uphill. The buildings each shared an inner wall, making the eastward face one long wall, up to the lake.

At the lake, the wall fell away into a planned stair, down to the lake's edge. Now that I was above the village's tower, Hrothgar could not see my passage. I stood straighter and trotted around the lake, over to the dark forest.

Finding myself back where my previous scouting mission had come, I made way up into the forest canopy. None of my fellows, in town, had remarked that the daily and evening rains had not come, on this day. Now, traveling by moonlight atop the dense canopy, I ran and I laughed. Leaping from treetop to treetop, like a sprite in the silvery dark airs of evening, I headed away.

Doing good, as Lars had commented, was a fine way to pass a seventh day. It was also a fine means of filling the sixth night's evening. I would rescue my dogs and two horses from their place of waiting.

Diving into my new ender chest while on the run, I consumed potions and foods for the trip. My speed increased, my leaps grew longer, the saturation of health from great foods improved, and my strength increased. The kilometers fell away as if I were born anew in a

changed world!

I had no intention to deceive Hrothgar, or the others, when I had said that Bob should also come along. My sincerity was at that time focused upon making those two homebodies fight through the wilderness. With just us three, the throngs of monsters along the way to the kennels would be fierce. In the open, without defense of walls to channel enemies into convenient killing slots, the battles would become almost endless running fights. That as my intent, to force my brothers into readiness. We must make ourselves ready for what Manger had described was coming up from the land's deep.

Then, after Lars insisted on being made party to my shenanigans, I saw that my trick would turn into a fruitless endeavor. The Spirit, which had once taken Lars from our company, would skew the battles and favor the conscript. Lars would enjoy undying health and rapid healing. Whether Lars perished or survived, we three other men would fight unequally in his shadow. No good end could come of mixing immortality with mere fighting men.

Unless immortal enemies appeared, of course. The descriptions that Manger had supplied of nearly immortal foes and their minions gave cause to rethink what Our Lord and King was calling upon us to become. With conscripts now laboring at the Spirit's works, what if greater minions of The Foe came to attack? Bogusville was wholly unprepared to defend the conscripts and their works from such monsters.

My formerly just cause of kenneling my animal allies fell away, compared now to the reality of the extreme foes coming forth. There would never be a safer time for me to bring packs and herds to aid our village. Times would get darker, very soon, if not this very night, and our isolated location forbade any retreat.

As I neared the hermitage of Derringer, I saw a great beacon of light thrusting straight up into the night. This was larger, more ostentatious, than the formerly welcoming light of this little out of the way place. The hermit, called Derringer, had discovered the means to make lighting of some amazing kinds. Mining away at the great depths, he said, had resulted in combining minerals in ways that came to mind. The result was a beacon, an amazing light which reached up from the depths, piercing even through clouds.

I remembered the fleeting energy which the former beacon had imparted. It had buoyed up my spirits. Seeming to give wings to my feet, I had hurried about in haste. Easily, I remembered, I had made fit kenneling for horses and dogs, before facing my wastefulness and unkind risky behavior.

Kneeling to Our Lord, repentant and apologetic, I had cried for our losses. My shame came from pride, for wasting lives when I ought to have been patient.

It was not in me to desert my loyal animals; not then nor even now. Several days passed, and yet I yearned for completion in having these companions back at my side. Whatever the outcome, I could not break away from the duty that my heart felt for these creatures. Their life—their only life—was filled with trust towards me looking out for their welfare.

Hastening across the forest, then down and whirling between the lesser trees, I sped to my destiny. Occasional patches of clear plains and treeless expanses gave me greater speed, but I used up potions and foods at a sobering pace.

Finally, closing within fifty meters of Derringer, I began to feel the newness of this hermit's works taking hold. The giant streaking light that blazed skyward filled my health to overflowing! My feet burned with desire to run! Even my arms ached with newfound strength to strike down at monsters!

"Hail, warrior!" a gravelly but familiar voice called out.
"Approaching at night ensures a quick death!"

"Derringer! It is Dodge, the Mayor, of Bogusville!" I shouted in reply.

"That cursed place?!" the hermit spat with disgust. "Why do you hurry so, to bring your curses upon me?"

"I come to remove my animals from your domain, sire!" I breathed heavily, now that my long run had ended. Winded, but recovering rapidly, I let the potions of the race wear off, leaving me spent.

"Do you realize that your animals triple and quadruple the number of monsters that I must slay?" Derringer demanded. "The dogs do not aid me, old man, but their presence increases the enemies which I kill."

"You sound pleased, as a stout hermit," I smiled with that perception.

"Well, leave us breed two or three, to remain with me, and then be on your way!" the hermit crowed happily.

"There be stronger, more merciless foes coming upon the world, sooner rather than later," I warned. "That is what prompts me to get the animals set up, before that night falls."

Derringer shuttered the barred window from which he had yelled. Opening a crafted iron door, he stood forth in mighty armor with an awesome sword at hand. Enchantments must have been thick upon both armor and weapon, for he seemed to exude an aura of magical powers.

"You seem to be less conceited," Derringer commented. "Perhaps your pack has good reason to wait so patiently."

I laughed, awkwardly but honestly. It was not in me to deny that I had been less considerate when I had passed this way.

"There is honesty in your laughter, but still you lack wisdom," Derringer assured me. "I would have enchanted the armors of your horses, but you gave me no such permissions."

"Let us breed the animals, give you your just rewards, and then speak of how we shall contend for our regions against the rising foes," I suggested.

"Hah! You shall not be king, old bard!" Derringer snorted, but he opened the way into the kennels and the horse stable. "The wickedness in high places has brought down several rulers and towns, from near and far. Is that the merciless foes of which you speak?"

"No, nor do I care much what weakens greater towns than my hamlet," I said without rancor. "Each has their own challenges, but mine has unearthed down deep a system of sorts. It generates or releases greater foes upon the world, and some of these do not die from wounds."

"What manner of beings are they?" Derringer asked.

"Our mason described them as a variety of things, from lesser gods down to armored skeletons wielding enchanted weapons," I described. "Even worse, there are Eggs of Creation and various spawning mechanisms creating monsters at a freakish pace."

I worked away at breeding and adopting out several pups and two colts, all the while discussing events with the hermit. The miller's works by conscripts, and the return of Lars proved of great interest. In return, the solitary warrior and adventurer explained for me how to create beacons. They could prove valuable for aiding defense and also for fighting against the monsters. We parted ways at the night's middle, and I set off towards home.

Weary though I was, now that I rode and my pack followed closely, the route home was shorter. Thinking upon the hermit's instructions, I turned each word and phrase over again, reviewing what he had said. It came as a surprise to find that one key phrase was a reminder of good fortune which my fellows had forgotten. We need not sleep, except to refresh our minds, for it availed no gain to the body.

Derringer never slept, or did so quite sparingly. He mastered his works and spent all his energies to profit and advance. He was a warrior, rancher, farmer, miner, and each other skill. Derringer suffered no distractions of governing nor social guises, for he had all that was needful.

Where I had no doubts of Derringer's sufficiency, upon return to Bogusville I found doubts about our readiness. In my mind, with certainty, I knew that Derringer could change all things for the better. It was thus that I defined what was needed, and began to plan for how to go about achieving that goal.

Morning of the seventh day brought change. Some strong-willed workers must have labored at the miller's place through the night.

I surveyed the works of the millers, outside the north wall of Bogusville. A stepped quartet of flour mills with sandstone structure and reddish roofs was a blaring contrast to local forested hills. My town, of Bogusville, was earthen and dark colors in tune with a subdued design. These two architectural styles of a bygone world provided a testimony to their different missions. Local lakes and cleared lands blended our achievements into a difficult harmony.

The millers had labored all day and then all night. Scarcely anything else was of interest in this benign fog which obscures our horizons. That is except for the now common supernatural beings, such as archer

skeletons and other unearthly creations of The Foe. The miller's works seem to be unchanged by the dreadful attackers, as if his kind are driven to haste beyond understanding. Although the thousand year kingdom of Our Lord on Earth has just begun, the miller works at a feverish pace. This brings me to consider our stance, our readiness, and yea even our confident ability to obey Our Lord at his convenience.

We each allot to ourselves a nod towards being one of Our Lord's chosen, sent to do works such as building this town. I, too, being of such mind, felt we were outcast from the common, by god's decree. Being isolated, we felt as if our special purposes were yet to be made clear. The lot of us, each and all, discussed this at meeting, and again at a secondary meeting. We agreed to labor together for founding the town and building a worthy community.

Our labors prospered beyond imagination, as if to each work done by hand there were two angels laboring and adding their gains to our efforts. Giant eggs appeared, as if by god's will, and from them hatched all manner of things! The Eggs of Creation, we dubbed them. Within their various guises lay many things which even the stoutest of angels and men should fear...and thus we locked them all away. The good with the less good; the needful with the wasteful and potentially disastrous. We thought this was wise, and ceased to labor so diligently, for we had grown rich.

Could that be true? Merely five years into the kingdom of Our Lord on Earth, and already wealth became common! Wealth, true and vast, without taxation or any earthly rule! And of that wealth, we donated freely to Our Lord and King, by leaving its refined and ready manner all over the lands about our town's former locale. That was the bidding of the Spirit, and thus it was all taken.

So much has changed, but within us as much as in the world about. Thus have I taken the occasion to write, to admire and ponder the works of the millers.

None of us knows the miller's former name, from before the coming of Our Lord to take reign over the Earth. Neither can we recall what were our names, or the names of bygone kin, kind, or of loved ones. Then it was not strange that we were gathered together, by Spirit, to decide our lot. That is as we discussed, at meetings, for we agreed readily and eagerly to do these few things now accomplished. Not one of us beggared or bolted. Each threw in his lot and agreed to tend herd and land, to build and become a town, and also to lend cover and safe sleep to passersby and wandering souls.

Mistakes were common, though thankfully few, during our first year. Our hurry to get on with things saw us make form and place for cemetery, to bury or to burn, even to crypt and safeguard corpses. It was as if scales covered our mind to blind us to the openly visible truth. That was a belated irony in this world of what once was habitual in the other time.

He is risen, Lord of Creation, ruler of life and taken death captive. Even Enoch, who walked side by side with Father for centuries, saw hell's first resident come to that place called Sheol, and knew that the Son would one day take it for his own. Mistakes were made, even by the sons of angels and men who walked the earth after Enoch left to school at the Father's knee, in heaven. Mistakes we guard against,

now in this last era of creation. We rise each day, assured of salvation, yet now the miller's works goad me to look deeper.

The world is awash in life, as if the great disappearance of humanity formerly of Our Lord's calling opened a giant horn of plenty. With their departure all things of modernity faded, washed from use, and the new rushed in to fill that void. No longer do the vision machines function, nor do their essences remain, nor any kind of transmission venue except for the blood.

The blood of the former world's end dried into deep red flakes, turned to stone. Crumbled and powdered, the redstone powers contraptions for physical purposes. (We do not call it bloodstone, for it is not His blood.) Tiny railways, now powered by redstone and gold, can mobilize small train carts and strings of them, from horizon to horizon and beyond! But there is no means for comfort, for convenience. Work we must; work we shall, but from the rising of the sun to its going down our daily allotted time is split. We each must perform all labor and yet remain on guard against the spawn of demons. No angel nor lesser gods rescue or defend us at any time. Neither is death permanent anymore, as Our Lord's written word once foretold. We respawn, refreshed yet aged; damaged yet wiser.

The miller seems not to notice such limitations. I have observed the hell spawn entering his works, even to do catastrophic noise which kills lesser men and any normal animals nearby. The miller works onward, scarcely interrupted except on rare occasion, taking no sleep nor resting overly long. His waterwheels and the great grinding millstones and furnaces labor without ceasing. It is not simply a seemingly tireless labor, but is established by a tale from a worker, named Lars, who is a son of my bygone brother. It is a tale of the miller.

Lars works at bricklaying, making foundations, and carving stone. That is his calling, Lars told me, and he is one of many, but none of two. In the new language, being 'none of two' means to have no affiliation, no group, or any belonging to a place except by trade. If Bogusville were to expand, then Manger, our mason, could gain Lars as town bricklayer. For now, Lars and his kind go from place to place, at the Spirit's urge, as conscripted for Our Lord's works. Lars was conscripted, for the miller, to do works for what the miller said was "the resurrection of Barbegal" in this region and time.

I knew nothing about Barbegal, nor what it might have to do with milling flour from grains. Lars explained what he had been taught to do. This would be a precursor to what would be done in other regions. It is a tale that I shan't forget soon, if Our Lord allows.

Once upon a time, that great city, called Rome, had legions of warriors. While it is true that Rome remains a city, the tale of Barbegal tells of Rome's army in conquest of many nations. Barbegal was in a nation that no longer exists, but Barbegal sat upon the route of a long aqueduct. That aqueduct remains, to this day! In this age! That was the site where Lars was resurrected, during Year Three, after his father's death and he was spirited away. Lars was returned to life at the site of his new calling. Whatever Lars used to be, he was now a bricklayer, and his first work was as a hod carrier for bricklayers rebuilding that aqueduct, and also rebuilding the Roman flour mills, at Barbegal.

The Roman army once needed tons of bread and flour, every day, in each region that they conquered. A legion of one hundred warriors also required one servant for each warrior, to carry his weaponry and gear. Thus, a legion of warriors took one hundred able men from a community at their passing, conscripting the men to be carriers until sundown. The army on the march could not afford to stop and find grains, cure those seeds, grind them into flour, cook the flour mix into bread, and so forth. The legions conscripted masons and bricklayers to build massive flour mills, such as at Barbegal. At Barbegal, the engineers created sixteen waterwheel-powered flour mills in a stairway alignment. Those mills supplied enough flour for thousands of warriors either stationed in the region or while they were on the march. Rome marched onward, long ago, in that bygone world of the Age of Grace.

Now, Lars came to Bogusville, last seventh day, on assignment. His calling was to help build a quarter-mass Barbegal for the miller. The miller's company also included two engineers, a baker, a Lord's Reign nutritionist, hod carriers, and a few other essential specialists along with five resident helpers.

When did the five resident helpers arrive? None came, that I saw arrive, and we few in Bogusville have not been called.

We have a rancher, thaumaturge, watchman, apothecary, mason, and me. I serve as a monster hunter, explorer, scavenger, carpenter, smithy, weaver, innkeeper, and general laborer. Each of us serves multiple purposes, but that is not my point. The point is that there are six of us, but the town needs only one of us to manage ongoing work. That would free up five of us to do other works. We stopped expanding after getting the basics of food, shelter, weapons and other necessities stably met. There are five of us with permanent luxury of deciding what to do with their time, or all six of us are pretending to be busy for five-sixths of each day.

That is our calling, to Our Lord and Savior. We must own up to having taken off a whole bunch of time without justification. We are lazy.

The miller and his crew are making way for feeding several hundred working people. If those people need to be fed then they must be busy doing something other than looking out for their own. I have to admit that our innkeeper doesn't have rooms for hundreds, or even for one dozen, but for seven! And I am the innkeeper! My rooms are fullâ€”plus three are double bunkedâ€”since the miller's arrival.

The truth is that we never imagined being needed, or called, to supply food and goods for hundreds of people. Miller is answering that call, but there is not a warehouse or a railway to handle that massive production. Lars' work on this project has run for seven days, but he expects ten more days until the end is in sight.

I must ponder the actual productive capacity of Bogusville.

The first issue, for us, was better food than bread and melons. Mushroom stew is okay, but we decided upon meat supplemented with fruit and fish and vegetables. Health saturation from cooked steak is the best means of survival. The daily production capacity of our ranch is fifteen head each of beef and pork and mutton. Bob, our

rancher is planning a new breeder that can output several hundred eggs per day. He also told me that the blood redstone systems could quadruple the beef output, but that option is still being studied. Honestly, the six of us consume only the smallest fraction of food output that Bogusville is ready to provide.

Shelter, which includes clothing and armor, came as byproduct to the ranching and also by our thaumaturge and apothecary working out their issues. Many of us looked askance at the need for Juice, the apothecary, but his work proved to be far more valuable than we foresaw. The thaumaturge, who we call Balmy, doubled as a spell caster of singular importance. Balmy has made huge enhancements to the functionality of our tools, weapons, and other items. Still, looked at in the larger picture, all of Balmy and Juice's works are occasional rather than requiring daily attention.

Our watchman, named Hrothgar, naps during the day, reserving his best energy for the night. The frights, which visibly fly around black walkers during the day, come into their own at night. Working in pairs quite often, the charged creepers fly in soundlessly and orbit a man's area. A sizzling tick presages their explosive demise, as one took my brother Cortez. Hrothgar saw it, and was injured while rushing to aid Cortez. All of us heard, and came running to the scene.

Cortez never returned, nor did his body stay, for it faded from sight as we gaped in awe. We built the entrance to our cemetery, but never a grave, nor any mausoleum nor furnace. The new realities emphasize Our Lord's kingdom is quite unpredictable. Thus we made high walls all around, and even cooked sand into glass in an ordinary furnace! Miracles abound, strange and unseen things lurk, nor dare we venture far from our brothers in town. Our concerns are real, for any of us might not return except as a named undead thing.

Bogusville is a village, in truth, but there are other kinds of villages, and another kind of villager. We have seen and produced them, from Eggs of Creation! Hatching two eggs, there stood a medicinal man of sorts, though not a man such as we, and also a farmer. I had seen such villages for people as these while exploring, but all their works were broken down, uninhabited, and did not look to be fit for men.

That night, after hatching the villager things, and ensconcing them in a vacant loft of the inn, the ravagers came in strength. The undead kin to the strange villagers wrenched upon door and wall, pounding to get close and to ravage the newly formed people. For once, those abominations ignored us, but we saw in a few of them a familial resemblance to our villagers. We torched, cut, hacked and shot with arrows until they all had died again. Hrothgar did the most damage, even though he was beset by two other nightmarish creatures.

So much has transpired that I shrink away from thinking of there being more to do. The realities keep advancing, growing, forcing us to adapt, to stay focused on Our Lord and the Spirit. Now, with the millers and their workers on the outside of Bogusville, we must advance to a new destiny. I, for one, cannot assume that any of my present duties will be fit for the changing kingdom. My calling is to adapt, to prosper, and to adventure!

2. Chapter 2 The Miller's Arrival

Chapter 2 Tales of the Miller's

"Dodge!" a man hailed me from a rooftop across the square.

"Bernard!" I replied to the rancher/grocer, who stood at his third-story porch, beneath the roof's peak of his grocery store.

"Bob!" he replied. "My name is Bob!"

"Okay!" I agreed with a laugh. "We have a rancher by that same name!"

Our watchtower, which is roughly in the middle of town, stands a full story taller than the next highest structure. The grocer's building was second in height so I pretended that a higher attitude came with my higher altitude. I stood watch for Hrothgar, who was at rest with a dose of Juice's design.

"Lars said that more are coming!" Bob announced the reason for calling loudly across the square. "Lars is staying here, second floor, and I will make six bunks for more comers."

"That little balcony makes it seem as if you can fly," I stated, seeming to change the subject. "If we double our occupancy, we must double the cane farm to produce enough paper and sugar. While you're at it, did you crunch the numbers of what we need for two hundred newcomers?"

"Two?" Bob's expression scowled with thought. "Miller's build? He may feed two or five towns, and we just happen to be here already. Why is it our duty? Did the Spirit put this upon us?"

"Towns," I said quietly, "take only six to ten people to build, and just two of us to do maintenance. Nothing rots, our food is gratifying and sanctifying, and we heal with astonishing speed, not to mention other miraculous facts."

"You're talking to yourselfâ€"again!" Bob groaned loudly.

"Can you see Miller's Lake?" I demanded. "It has two feeder streams, now, that spring right out of solid stone!"

Bob did not need to look. The brunt of my statement hit home. If the rate of water flow doubled, then the output rate of the flour mills might double. Any juggling of numbers was pointless. The Spirit could and would conscript each person and region to do Our Lord's will, at any moment.

"Want to meet?" Bob called out the next order of business.

"I want to meet Miller!" I decided. "He's been staying at the inn, but he's never there when I'm about. I will have to go out and invite him to join us."

"Join? Join the town?" Bob was nodding in reply to his own

question.

"May as well, since his work upstages ours," I agreed.

Neither of us said more. We had no plans. We had been surviving, feeling a bit guilty about not doing more but also feeling guilty about having abundance without just cause.

"I'll take watch," Bob stated.

I waited, watching all around Bogusville. There were no new plans for expanding the village, but still we decided to make way towards the east. There were waterway links to several small lakes. Looking at matters as they stood, I decided that we deserved to learn how the miller's works would be part of the town's future.

The waterfront was an unused expanse that was eighty meters wide. We had set out to clear it, to cultivate that land, and to prepare docks to invite trade and expansion. Now that the miller's group had industrialized the mount's flank, I needed to determine how their future and ours worked together. Engineering to use water for power was clever, but what if their ingenuity extended beyond just one facility? What if they needed more water, such as the waterfront, lakes, and ways?

To the south was an isolated lake and small ponds. Southeast was a promontory which hid a small elevated lake. Southwest was forested and then south was a majestic mount which we called Westmount. I considered clearing away all of the forest from within one hundred meters around the village. There was no real justification for such a scheme. It was a marginally practical use of time that would accumulate wood.

"Stockpiling," I sighed. "We can gather much but with so little use, and now? Now, after the village was just translated to a different region?"

The questions hung in the air, awaiting the Spirit to answer. The Spirit had truly plucked up Bogusville from the midst of a jarred region, and transplanted it entirely to this present locale. The former home region was undergoing the annual purge of unrepentant people, jarring the foundations of the region. The instability of regional weather and odd behavior of animals was a judgment of calamity.

Just a few days ago, I hurried back to that region to rescue my dogs. Over the years I had tamed four wolves, then bred three guard dogs from those. I lost two of the canines in fights against bangers. On the long march back to Bogusville, I made a kennel at a hermitage called Derringer. The constant battles with mobs of monsters had wearied my soul. It was too hard upon me to continue striving to save my canine friends and also get back to my town. Now, I had finally fulfilled the promise to bring them home.

The sounds of Bob climbing the four stories of stairs up to the watchtower peak were barely noticeable. He was inherently unhurried and quiet. His ranching work with animals bespoke a calm spirit which did not leap to anger nor hesitate when making the kill. The levels of the watchtower build varied in height, from three to four meters each, thus the three-story grocer's house with its steeply pitched

roof was nearly as tall as the five-story watchtower.

"Do you know..." Bob said from a floor below, as he paused to look out of some windows. "Do you know what I do not miss, about where we used to be?"

"The ice," I stated. "The ice that came upon the lands across the river."

"The bone-crunching, tooth-grinding, relentless ice!" Bob agreed, resuming his climb up the stairs. "At least we are in a moderate climate, now, instead of being perched upon the very lip of Our Lord's cold demeanor towards the..."

"That could be us, someday," I warned the grocer/rancher. "We've seen the attitude for the hot fiends, in the nether realm, when Juice needed warts and such."

"Wouldn't that be cheery?" Bob persisted. "If Our Lord froze over hell, the same as he did for that forsaken bunch, that we left behind?"

"They are being reminded, not forsaken," I countered. "The loss of water to ice is more severe in some ways than when he decrees a year of drought and winds."

"Having water but being unable to wet anything," Bob agreed. "That's irony, to let them keep the water but not to use it except by candlelight."

"Even candlelight water will freeze over, especially in a basin," I said. "You know, they must kneel to the frozen river, by torchlight, until their leaders and councils repent before Our Lord, or else they go thirsty."

"For how long, I wonder?" Bob prodded. "How long can a man thirst, until he finally repents from weariness of being thirsty?"

"Perhaps for those people, a few centuries," was my guess. "If they repent, and be blessed with family, then it gets worse."

"Blessing is worse?" Bob's face returned to a familiar thoughtful focus.

"Children and women do not suffer hardship well," I explained. "It is the edge of a razor upon which we fell. On the one side, we seek to please Our Lord and Savior, thus risking being entrusted with a family's welfare, guiding them, and so forth. We chose to suffer independence, this blessing without shackles to family and region. There is no stick with which to smite an unruly brat or a selfish wife except that we will be stricken down as failures. We chose independence, Bob, regardless of not recalling that which we forsook."

"Aye," Bob sighed with acceptance. "Lars says to tell you that there will be many workers for roads and ways, coming soon."

"Do you know what the smell of baking ovens tells my spirit?" I asked.

"It tells me that cakes and pies be nearer than yesterday," Bob smiled.

"It tells me that women and children are coming near," I warned. "This realm has no shortage of meats and stews. We produce enough already to feed one hundred warriors each day, and you said that more output is feasible."

"Meats and stews, we do," Bob agreed only halfway. "The redstone affair that I have been working up for the cattle and pigs? It can output thirty of each, daily, but that is not thirty whole critters."

"Not whole?" I was taken by surprise.

"We get maybe two steaks per animal, with blessed swords," Bob stated. "Two steaks! Each critter is from half of our size to four times that big! Two steaks? Who are we kidding?"

"And the rest?" I wondered. "Where does the rest of each animal go? Did we not discuss this, just yesterday?"

"It goes to the same place that our invisible coworkers labor?" Bob posed his reply as a question.

I would not say what Bob wanted me to say. My silence prodded the animal caretaker to continue speaking.

"Dodge, the angels may not be the only invisible beings working out affairs with Our Lord and Savior," Bob persisted. "Something, somehow, is making ninety-five percent of each slaughtered critter vanish from this world. That doesn't happen with bread, or mushroom stew, or cake. It only happens when a living breathing thing is killed."

"We talked about this," I said again.

"We talked about this," Bob said.

"What did we decide?" I wondered.

"We decided that soulless critters have this life, no afterlife, for starters," Bob admitted, "and that us being made healthy by their flesh is the best end for our companionship."

"You know that this is true," I spoke earnestly. "The proof of this sincerity is that my friends, the canines and horses, would give their lives to defend me. I also fight for their welfare. If a pelt or a tooth survives their death, should I not use it to defend us all the more? I believe in this, but I cannot communicate with them so well as you can do."

The brutality of kindness given to a doomed being no longer bothered me. Their lives either enjoyed kindness or were given no mercy of being loved. Bob loved all animals, openly and honestly, but he would not risk harm to a person for the sake of an animal. We differed in our emotions and spirits, yet we labored as one for the same cause.

"To get only one or two steaks from sacrificing a kind animal seems

unjust, to me," I said carefully. "What you say is that something else is gaining almost all of the sustenance and the blessing of our sacrifice."

"It would be unjust whether or not a critter openly hated us, also," Bob pointed out. "Being a genuine animal with only trust towards us and happiness to be cared for is not the issue. The issue always has been that these animals and this world are not what our minds expect to exist. We remain the product of the world that we were born into, although we cannot remember it."

"Thus, we can be wrong about what is fair to expect," I reasoned.

"It is fair!" Bob responded quickly. "I have no doubt about that, but we rightly suspect that more is going on than we can see."

With that statement hanging in the air, I departed the watchtower. We left the conversation unfinished. It was just one more unfinished thing in a completely uncultured world.

A short walk to the north gate cleared away my mental cobwebs. I crossed our arched short bridge, following the stepped route down six meters into a westerly turn. This road went along fifty meters to turn at the lowest end of the four flour mills. Smells and atmosphere of business of activities within the mills thickened the air.

This was a seventh day. In every seven-day cycle, the seventh was reserved for worship, to put aside worldly concerns and focus upon serving Our Lord. These many evidences of work and productivity went contrary to my expectation about being welcomed.

Halting at the unframed opening for a door, I looked into the building. There were not any people within, going about works. The floors were smooth, even shiny from sweeping or artistry. The walls facing me were bare. Inset shelving above clean workbenches and basins held cutlery, spices, and the like. A large bank of ovens filled the north wall, on my right, inset behind brick facing. To my left was a behemoth millstone, rising fully three meters, and above that the wood gearing which enabled a waterwheel to power the grinding beast.

Waiting silently, beholding work approaching the finishing stages, I expected to meet somebody attending to it all. There was neither door nor defender for preventing damages from monsters or accidents with animals. I ventured to take two steps into the building, watching for beasts and monsters. Torches and furnaces lit the structure within, diminishing the risk of surprise.

Looking across the twelve meters of floor, my eyes rested upon a stairway rising from its midst. I strode in without changing direction, to gaze up the stair. It continued, in stepped fashion, up through all four milling structures. At each mill, the stair reset to meet its next riser across the floor, then up to the next, and so forth. The three-meter high entries led through each middle wall, both at the stair and above each millstone, so that I could not see much beyond the next building in line, from any stairway vantage point.

"Hello!?" I called out, preferring not to wander through works

without a host knowing of my presence.

"Welcome!" a voice called down, from far up the stairway. "Come in! Come up!"

"Miller?" I called upward as I climbed the stairs. To right and left the flaming heat of furnaces and the resting behemoths of the millstones took hold of my attention.

"Yes! Yes! I am the miller!" the man shouted happily. "My name is Ben! Ben, the miller! You are the innkeeper?"

"Yes, that's me," I said as I climbed the sets of stairs.

"We meet, at last!" Ben shouted, turning and waving an arm to several men who sat around the uppermost chamber of the mills. "These are my crew, and family! These conscripts of the Spirit stand ready to do Our Lord's work, with fervor!"

"That is the mayor, of the town," one man mentioned to Ben. "He's innkeeper, monster hunter, wolf tamer, and many things. Lars told us about him. He is Mayor Dodge."

"Oh?" Ben stopped motioning and stood still, clearly thoughtful. "This is that man, of whom Lars spoke? This one, whom Lars objected to going back into the land under judgment?"

"Hello, friends," I said easily. "Thank you, for welcoming me. I truly do not know what relationship the village has with your works, but I came to invite you to join our village."

"Us?" Ben turned alertly to stare into my eyes. "Each of us? You invite us to join your village, yet you do not know our names, reputations, or what works the Spirit has conscripted us to do? Are you insane?"

"Perhaps I do not know of sanity," I admitted. "It is you who are called to build mills, and presumably to operate them. I decided to find out if the village should join you in whatever this work shall achieve."

Ben grew less agitated, stilling in body and in feature. It appeared that he was in a sort of trance, awaiting being awakened by whoever controlled the trance from the unseen realm.

"Warehouse!" Ben exclaimed, returning to his excitable demeanor. "You are to build a warehouse! Yes! Many, manyâ€"a great manyâ€"warehouses! There will be ships, and armies afoot, and by rail, all coming through and emptying them, one after another!"

"When?" Dodge asked. "I have heard nothing of armies, of ships and so many people comingâ€"waitâ€"coming here? Is this the many people whom Lars spoke of, this morning?"

"No, not Lars," Ben said. "Lars is a builder, a bricklayer, and stonemason. It is his unction to do what he is called to do, just as it is mine and theirsâ€"these men hereâ€"to build and set up milling operations."

"Then you are not the miller who will stay here, to run these things?" I was mystified. "That is fine, but you are still invited to join our village, for the time that it is needful or convenient for each person. You need not join, if that is your preference, to remain unfettered by such things."

"There, then; that is it!" Ben rejoiced at my closing statement. "We are to be unfettered!"

Nodding silently, agreeing with whatever decision the individuals found to be in keeping with their calling, I said no more about the matter. Still, I stood there looking around casually without moving to leave. I was just turning to see where and how things moved and what should occur.

"You, Mayor Dodge, are interested in becoming a millwright, and miller, and perhaps a baker?" Ben inquired.

"I am interested if that is a duty that I should fulfill," I spoke candidly.

Ben shook his head just a little bit, not breaking eye contact.

"No?" I was surprised at the ease of dismissal.

"Not a calling, for you, but perhaps duty," Ben explained. "Most of us are called according to the will of god, by the Spirit, but some of us are less spiritually focused. Such men respond to readiness, to fulfilling needs, and to the duties of a situation."

That list fairly described me. I looked around at these men. Each of them had a weapon at hand, at ease but never relaxed from wariness. Readiness was a fit term for them.

"The tools of any trade lend themselves to many uses," Ben continued, acutely aware of my assessment. "Being ready to build also is readiness to action, and to more than that. The body is familiar to taking action, to being mobile even while not in motion. The mind is freed from directing it to do unfamiliar things and need only confirm a thought. The body fulfills the mind's certainty. The spirit moves them both."

The inference could be that our inactivity—"my town's inactivity"—had made us less ready to do anything. Inactivity fueled indecision. The urge to plan shrank away from commitment. On the contrary, I felt and acted upon the desire to do something. I was here, now, following the decision that this needful action must be taken.

In silence, I admitted that this action was tardy in being done. I ought to have been involved from the first hours, becoming familiar if not directly committed to aiding this work.

"The readiness to act comes not from merely doing things," I replied. "The town has many things to which we attend hourly, but the repetition conforms us to an imaginary bubble of safety and comparative inactivity."

Ben gave a noncommittal look of indifference. It spoke loudly how

unconvinced he remained.

"The tripâ€”the adventureâ€”to regain my dogs, was upon the heels of the village being moved here," I explained. "When we were returned to the town, it was obvious that no living thing had survived the transfer. I investigated, to see if those animals are tied to that region. If they are native products of that region's body, they could still walk out but not be spirited away."

The sincerity of my outlook registered as worthwhile. Ben nodded but then he shrugged it away.

"I need not defend this, to you," I continued. "I explain that I do not take life lightly, especially those trusting in my constancy. When I suggest that you become townspeople, here, it is with that same spirit."

"That you would be constant, loyal, and go to lengths in order to rescue us when the Spirit does not?" Ben countered. "No man rescues us, for we are the ones who are conscripted to do great things!"

Without warning, Ben turned and strode away behind the milling stone. He went out of a doorway and up a stairway. The miller walked away until he stood upon the lake fashioned for this task. I followed along, but not too closely.

"This is twice the lake that it was, upon our arrival!" Ben motioned at the deep waters, his voice carrying across them with clarity. "These stones and cobble and bricks are of our handiwork, as conscripted to do! Look around, at the road carved from the stone mountain, the steps for carts, the softer stone as is kind to hooves of horse and mule drawing the carts."

He spun around, aware of my having come along, but he was not looking at me. Ben motioned to the topmost mill, its roof and outermost wall, wordlessly pointing out what was obvious but unremarked.

"We have not ranched draw animals," I offered.

"You have not seen any here!" Ben emphasized. "Have you?"

"None," I agreed.

"Yet these buildings, constructed of sandstone and acacia and jungle wood, are of no concern to you?" Ben demanded. "How did we come to get great chests filled with these materials, yet nothing from your town?"

Silence was my reply. The rhetorical question demanded no answer.

"Not one pin nor stone of this work came from your village!" Ben pointed away, towards Bogusville. "For all my patience, and reasoning with men of action, not one of us felt moved to ask after your town's resistance to being neighborly!"

The obvious silence from the gathering company of specialists and of helpers informed me to remain quiet. I bit my tongue, refraining for giving way to an irritated reply...for the moment.

"The signs posted within your village proclaim that any who do not work shall starve, but we have seen not one whit of work beyond your walls, for several days now," Ben described. "Many full days, with six of you seeing this team of men working virtual wonders of achievement within sight and hearing of your bedroom. What are we to think of Bogusville, that we should relay to others on our travels to build and adventure? Ah, the Bogeys, we will say, do not come out of yon walled camp to adventure nor to offer aid! They huddle within, to scheme to defraud the victims of the wilderness from safe food and safer companions."

Without a word of interest in what I might reply, the miller strode away. He went below, back into the warmth of his buildings.

"Why are more coming?" I asked and followed along, going down into the topmost mill. "We who cower within our meager walls and shrink from friendly skulkers who vanish at dawn and reappear at dusk, we desire to know."

My tone had changed. I was now coming back in reply to the miller's accusatory words of dismissal.

"None of these forest-wise workers of yours deigned to mention what their business was about!" I said with a wave of my arm to include the group. "We had to inquire of a kin whose work you admire. What of the towns and little villages you have built, the gathered skills and craftsmen who cast their lot in with yours to see through the next thousand years? What wandering souls like yourself did them any favors? Dare you to abide with social ties, to condemn the world around rather than to risk any of them coming to harm?"

I paused, looking around, pointedly unamused at these meager works. With a withering glance at the ovens, I moved to the next stair lower, then back to the top.

"Granted, your genie brought sand and clay and a bit of tree," I shrugged it away as nothing great. "Your skilled artisans crush and refine seeds to make a clay patty of food with which to bake. Your engineers design and fit paddles to wheels the like of which children at play can do, by age ten. You handle sword and bow and hammer with ease, but I see no animals here to your aid."

I gestured expansively, silently, face open to inquire a reply from anyone listening. No reply came. I was not finished speaking.

"What then shall my hamlet say is their tale of the miller?" I turned the table upon Ben, the miller. "They skulk in at dusk, stealthily as a thief, and are gone with day's break, as if embarrassed that they carry no tent nor food or materials of trade. Great wonder fills the townsfolk with the mystery of the banging monsters which halt none of this work! It seems as if a sideshow of freaks has come to entertain each other in hiding. We six, the surviving inhabitants of yon village, wonder at how not to interfere, for we are uninvited, unasked, and unsought. We are but simple townsfolk, producing meats and grains and fruits in plenty. Plenty, did I say? Plenty, sufficient to feed this little group and ten more of its like without us breaking a sweat!"

With yet another dramatic pause, I turned and walked away, going down

the stairs. I strode into range of greater numbers of ovens. I spoke loudly, one more time, but did not pause in leaving.

"All while we laze away the days and kill monsters coming near," my voice fell deafened in the heat waves, not echoing but dying. "Should you need more than a place to hide and sleep, my people can ready a stout home for your likes within any given day. For we gather, craft, and hoard."

My leave-taking halted. I turned around and then I leaped up the stairway, two steps at a time, as quickly as any nimble creature. In my hand was a glowing magical sword, all of diamond, dribbling particles of dangerous magics.

The group of ready warriors building the mills stood ready, each with a weapon of fair ability. They were surprised by this turn of events, not by me coming up the stairway.

"Your piddling chests of materials are no match for the wizardry of our village thaumaturge," I announced. "The entirety of this site, all of its materials, all of the tools used here, and your weapons, clothing, armor, foods and petty trinkets would fit in just one of his chests!"

There were two glimmers of surprise, I saw. My words cut these men down to normal worldly description in the eyes of a warrior. They were unused to having their feet held to the fire of my inquiry.

"The only item of value here is you!" I shouted, sheathing my sword, and with that action it vanished from view. "It is your worthiness, your dedication and determination which give any value to this piece of a bygone world! That is what I came here to descry, to see if ye are worthy additions to my little hamlet of unobtrusive survivors."

"What if we say nay, to being townsfolk?" Ben inquired saucily. "We have here a gathering of equals and betters, larger than your hamlet has. We may be of a mind to mind our own business, but to remain at your wall, for this is where the will of Our Lord made clear by the Spirit for us to do."

"Then welcome to the neighborhoodâ€”neighbor," I bowed slightly.

"What plans, if any, do you have for neighbors, such as trade, business, life and the like?" Ben asked.

"The latest plan is for us to plumb the harbor depths, make ways and means for trade and expansion," I answered with quiet words. "There is one other matter, though, in which you may be interested."

Ben waited, arching an eyebrow in question.

"This area, from yon north lane to the river east and beyond, to the nearest islet on isthmus, was named in a town expansion plan."

"Here?" Ben demanded with sharpening tone. "Your town made plans to expand at this site?"

"Why, yes, we did," I spoke with stately patience. "The name of the expansion is Miller's Grant. It was drawn up on the first day of your construction work"before Lars said anything to us about this place."

"How far did this granted land extend, to west and east?" Ben wondered with the slightest of chagrin at being surprised.

"From beyond Miller Lake to that isthmus, beyond the nearest waterway to the east," I described. "It was clear that your works would need access far beyond this locale, therefore we named two roads after your works: Ascension and Descent, for this mill's receiving area. Those connect to the waterfront and thence to North Mill Lane, and back along Mill Creek, under our north bridge."

The layout seemed thoughtful, as I described it, but Ben seemed not to approve of agreement. Eyes of several of the men sought his, and with a look away to the east the question became clear.

"What of connecting a road to the regional main route, over to the east?" Ben asked me. "Why all these paltry little avenues yet you avoid linking to the main way, between north and south?"

"The same regional route that I traveled, to rescue my dogs, and two horses, and fought monsters going and returning?" I replied icily. "There is no favor from that route that profits this village sufficient to justify the risk."

"Hah, ye do defend your own, townsman," Ben stated with calm appraisal. "The kennel, at Derringer, seems quite stable, and your animals yet live."

Lars must have identified the kennel, for the miller's party. This informed me of which direction the troupe of workers had traveled.

"We visited that judgment area, to witness the Spirit's handiwork," Ben stated as a fact. "When I say visited, I mean that we each were gathered together, there, from various points, the same as your nephew. Lars was hit hardest by a memory of this world having gone into nonexistence, for his father died there, in battle with monsters. Died, and did not return, nor find resurrection to some other trade, as has been done with us."

With care not to scowl nor give evidence of my feelings, I said nothing. It was news that the vanishing of Bogusville would hurt anyone's feelings.

"You have not asked why we return to the theme of Rome's architecture and the purpose of this place," Ben prodded.

"Lars is smitten with Rome, which is good enough reason," I said. "It came up, in discussion, that the gross output of this facility could feed hundreds or more, and that our village needs to be up to supplying its share."

"That may be the case," Ben agreed. "Your village has its purpose; we have our own. It is comforting to know that your group thought ahead to provide us with ways and means to supply harbor and overland

freight. As for the purposes of this build, I do not know if it shall be used, ever, nor if it would supply for many hundreds or just for one."

"One?!" I exclaimed.

"Surely, Mayor Dodge, you have seen the haunts of nether and other realms, beyond this world?" Ben inquired. "There are greater things in this Earth than can be imagined by the likes of us. Greatness, however, does not infer that they know how to make flour, or to cook well."

A growing urge to hide my face in my hands took hold. I did so, and rubbed my palms over my face. In so doing, I tried to consider taking hold of the outlook of the miller.

"Let us reason in reverse, for a moment, Mister Miller," I suggested.

"Reverse of what?" Ben wondered.

"What if we are the instigating factor, not the support factor?" I asked. "What if it is your works and our own that generates change to this region? What if we seek to achieve that goal without waiting for others to find us useful?"

"Advertise our presence?" the thought came to the miller of its own accord.

"Publicize, send samples away to that regional route, set up markets for the exchange with other regions, and more," I expanded the idea.

"Make profit?" now Ben was intrigued. "What need have we, each or together, of anything others may have?"

"Need? No, not that!" I laughed. "Am I alone waiting on the lead of the Spirit to determine what to do? Have I not seen the need, in your presence and works, with my eyes? Even if you are spirited away to another calling does not change the functionality of these devices of your creation."

"You fairly cursed exchange with that regional route, just moments ago," Ben pointed out.

"I cursed making road to that route," I disagreed. "I see no reason to let that regional route be unused. There are other ways to transport goods than by building a road to that place."

The shrewdness of my suggestion clearly gained close consideration from the unusually silent audience. I waited for a reason to continue.

"Anyone can build a road, from that route to here," Ben mentioned. "If trade with this village becomes popular, they will make such a road."

"If the output of your people and mine is already set out for trade at the route, why then would anybody build a road away from there, to here?" I asked.

"Again, Mayor, what do we seek in trade?" Ben persisted.

"Do you not see the judgment region, in need of food?" I retorted. "Is it uninhabited? Are there no people pleading with Our Lord for food which they cannot supply on their own? What will we learn from a grateful people, to enhance the knowledge that is handed to our descendants and kinds?"

I turned away, leaving that meeting with the miller's band. We had laid grounds for proceeding in a new direction. Bogusville had become a place of value in the esteem of the millers. That happened because Lars was part of the miller's party, and the Spirit had shown them the consequence of being removed from among a land under judgment. The sword of the Spirit that severed them from the land under judgment had not cut off their history. The rescued became morally bound to feed the hungry because their conscripted mission was set out to produce enough bread to feed an army.

"Mayor!" the miller called to halt my exit.

Slowing at the stairway's end, I turned to listen.

"Your ranches can supply so much!" Ben stated the issue of interest. "Why do you not supply the food for that region, yet we come to make bread and cakes, to feed the hungry? This is not logical!"

"Logic?!" my voice carried when it had not done so, earlier. "The vast majority of food stock vanishes when the external shell is taken! One part in twenty is for consumption, but nineteen parts disappear. Vegetarian food suffers no such loss!"

We could not see one another, but we heard what was needful.

"Then how!" Ben demanded, coming down the stairway, into view. "How is it that you can feed ten groups of this size, without much effort? That was your claim, stated to my party."

"Do you mean how can we feed so many engineers, builders, millers, wrights, and assistantsâ€"but not feed the judgment region?" I reworded the question to expose its real purpose.

"Yes, that is what I mean, also," the miller agreed.

"Because we are taken away, after proving that we could supply such quantity of livestock," I explained. "Not steaks, but living animals, whole herds of them, to cover the frozen land. That is what was removed from their midst, Miller. We are just people, but our capacity to feed that land was removed. Here, we can feed your kindsâ€"conscripted servants of Our Lord and King, but there?"

The miller stood his ground. Perhaps he saw me as a carefuller adventurer than had been described.

"The Spirit allowed you take animals from there, to here," Ben pointed out. "The cost was high, but not only for you. We were shown the devastating effect of Lars having lost his father and his home."

I waited. There was more to what the miller was saying than I

discerned.

"If you had not gone to their rescue, the dogs and horse would have remained, when Lars beheld emptiness," Ben reasoned. "He would have seen them, and had no choice other than to leave them. You have entrusted nobody with ability to rescue your beloved animals."

"You are the third man to remind me about that fact," I said with some resignation. "Apparently, I should do something about it. Still, I thank Our Lord that they were gone before you arrived."

Ben came closer, looking at me, trying sincerely to make out my meaning.

"Tell me this, if you can..." I continued. "When you left that place, did you march here, battling through mobs of monsters? Or did you walk undisturbed, without a fight, and so your men are armed but scarcely attacked or suffering grievous harm?"

"Conscripts do not suffer the same as others," Ben admitted. "How we travel is by the Spirit."

"Then your question about my duties has been answered," I surmised. "You are to build this behemoth milling site, then be on your way until the Spirit releases you to a fitting calling. Lars may remain, ascending from mason to millwright, but my townsfolk are to do the remainder. They will be the bakers and chefs, dray drivers and dockside trade managers."

"Perhaps," Ben admitted. "Perhaps also some of my party will find their calling to become townsfolk, as you invited us to do."

"That seems the more likely scenario, in my opinion," I agreed. "We shall be very busy, in town. I cannot foresee much, but I also cannot imagine that this great work shall remain free from fussy skirts and toys laying underfoot. We may be the first spirited hereâ€"yours and mineâ€"but this is only just the start of greater things."

"Truly," the miller said thoughtfully. "My men have discussed that very thing. It is a presumption, we decided, that whatever we now do is assumed to be of use during this year. Did you forget that this is but one of many such places which we are assigned to build?"

"I remember, but I also recall that Lars training included not being the first class of trainees, nor the last," I replied. "Bear with me, one moment, while I restate what will be the path of this age."

"There will be thousands of builders, and not a few like these here, for the whole world will one day rebel against Our Lord and King," I began. "Those armies which turn against him shall come from farm and field, a great multitude, and they shall require food by the hundreds of shiploads. It is written."

"Between now and that time, just five years into Our King's reign, we are barely the forerunners of millions who will become our inheritors," my tale for the miller continued, "Many of our descendants will rebel against Our Lord. We will perish while they promise to remain faithful, but we already know what has been written about that time."

"My question remains," I reminded the miller, "what can we learn from the grateful people suffering judgment under their leaders, which we pass on to our generations?"

The miller looked at me with a strange expression. I do not know what his thoughts were, but something changed about his demeanor.

We parted ways, neither saying more about the complex matter of guesswork in the offing. Bogusville survived by tenacity, using guesswork to prepare for what was foreseeable and predictable. Millwrights apparently needed none of that, for their work was conscripted, their duties ordained, their progress led by the Holy Spirit. Again, I must deal with the realities of being largely mortal while placed in proximity to largely immortal persons. They cannot see nor think with hearts as desperate for fulfillment as mortals must suffer each day.

It had been unmerciful for me to jab at the miller's descendants, but he needed to awaken from the self-aggrandizing stupor of conscription. Conscripts held that their calling was holy and righteous service of god and man, but their folly was faith so pure that they held it a sin to plan ahead. The world abounded in wealth and foods beyond containment, but yet the conscripts gloriously claimed that their works would feed whole armies. Those whole armies would not exist until the end of this age; a fact which was written before the foundation of the world, but which these conscripts seemed not to have read.

Lacking a Town Tome, the written Word did not travel in the backpacks of conscripts. Lars was without excuse for falling under the spell of conscription, for Cortez had read the Word and trained his son. Lars declared that it was his calling to masonry, and artful design, but that his conscription was merely training to fulfill his duty.

I admitted that Lars seemed to be cut from the same cloth as Manger, and not as the conscripts, but I did not know them well. Perhaps there were different levels of conscription and dedication which the Spirit discerned appropriate for one and not for another.

Returning to town, I relieved Bob from oversight. There remained many duties and changes for me to outline, investigate, clarify, and map out. Such things needed attention to detail before calling a meeting.

"Balmy!" I hailed the mage, who had just stepped onto his secondary porch, out above the lower story of his home.

"Hail, Mayor!" the thaumaturge replied, turning away and climbing an isolated stair to a locked spire.

Balmy's spire, at the southeastern corner of his home, rose halfway up from the second story. The detached containment facility held nothing other than a cot, as far as I could see from the watchtower vantage. The spire seemed for all the world like a prisoner's chamber, but without a prisoner.

I noted that Balmy locked the door as he entered the spire from the outside stair. This was no secret, nor that he spent hours alone in that chamber of solitude. Nobody yet surmised the true purposes of

being locked away from the world, but yet remaining within the sanctuary of town. Apparently the mage had issues to resolve which required such a place. It stood partly above the house and away from the dungeon which held his portal to the nether.

I had ventured within Balmy's maze, and it wasn't pretty. The nether chamber had three trapdoor access covers, besides the upper room one-way door. Why the mage had a cot beside the nether portal was another mystery, since things from the other side could come through the portal at any moment. The walls reeked of dungeon dankness, as if transplanted from some dangerous part of the worldly domain. Great powers had somehow cracked the stone bricks during their tenure, for whatever reason.

Taken together, as a whole, the thaumaturge had earned respect, or at least a certain wariness. Balmy once shouted that he was not a sorcerer, nor a mage, nor even the apprentice of such people. His esteem of his knowledge and ways was so low that none of us dared to ask what greater beings he had found in his adventures.

Manger's adventure resurrected Balmy's eagerness to discover mysteries. I saw that the desire had never departed but had been muted by our boring lives. It was similar to Juice's anxious examination of Manger's artifacts. Even our apothecary was excited by the news of dangerous changes coming upon this region, if not upon the whole world.

Derringer had asked me about the terrible evils which had brought about the fall of several towns and places. He appeared to be exceptionally well armored and capable beyond normal needs. I knew nothing of those places, and neither did the miller's crew make mention of such dangers. Conscripts truly seemed to care nothing about other people, yet here I was uncaring about fallen villages and towns within a few day's journey.

Without further delay, I commissioned Balmy to armor and breed the horses and to breed dray animals. Bob could well hatch colts but not donkeys, nor breed up the mules for fast service. Bob would be best kept busy expanding farmland and stock. Juice was too caught up in making dreadful potions for me to disturb, but his adventuring time was nearing at an obvious pace. Manger had proven his mettle, yet I wondered whether tasking the mason with a great project was just the ticket to strengthen his spirit to greater heights.

Hrothgar, the watchman, needed no urging to battle. Neither did he waste away days without forging greater weapons and tools for Balmy to enchant. Still, the truth was that Hrothgar wanted to journey through the dark forest, dispatching any and all minions of The Foe. His spirit was willing, but although his stature was greater than any of our kind he was not nearly so strong nor energetic that he could withstand witches. The potions of those evil minions slew or weakened greater men than Hrothgar, and he was not fit to survive a long fight with those evil enchanters.

Another project that needed to be addressed was the creation of a foundry for recovery of article essences. The recovery efforts of Balmy were too paltry and we would require a greater mass of castoff goods. To salvage gold from gold, iron from iron, and enchantment from enchanted would be a boon to our capabilities. Whether the source material fell from friend or from foe, the output could be

turned to advance our kinds.

I functioned as the village smithy, also, and thus the duty to transform or repair basic castoff goods was mine alone. Neither was I weak, but my comparably greater age demanded attention. Children borne into this age would never suffer the infirmity which the advent of Our Lord relented from my body and mind. Still, it was a fact that my spritely behavior was not equal to that of Derringer, who was half my age and yet easily twice my capability. I knew without discussion that my kind would pass away. Younger and mightier adventurers would stride across the regions, rising as great oak trees above elders withering away in their shadows.

Still, duty called me to be more, do more, and to prepare the better. The way ahead lay hidden in the perennial fog at vision's edge. All the world was constrained to do and to contend with what was within their domains. My vision of the end of times showed no such barrier of expanses. Man and monster and demon would see across the world without hindrance...gathering together thereupon for the great march against that holy city, of Our Lord and King.

Even as I knew that my knowledge would die in my grave, unbelieved by many of my descendants, duty called me to prepare their way. They would disbelieve even the hint that they would turn against Our Lord. Thus, they might labor faithfully for nine centuries and bear many faithful generations before that dark and fateful time. To them, and to the people of this day, I owed allegiance and action upon foresight.

Nearer to day's dusk, I left the watch to find our mason. He was busily taking all that he had once known and reconfiguring his storage and tools. New realities demanded changed behavior to take command of matters. I seated my dogs outside of our mason's door, for his shop was too small for several canines inside with us.

"In what manner did you descry the location of town, from down in the caverns and ways of the deep?" I inquired.

"Eh?" Manger was shaken from his reverie and works. "What did you say?"

"How did you know whence to ascend, into these buildings?" I repeated. "From darkness and echoes, without landmark nor marker, you arose to within stone's throw of your workbench. How did that occur?"

"It wasn't easy!" Manger scowled. "Of all the questions, you have shown almost no interest in what lay far below, but want to know how I came up to air!"

"So, I do," I agreed.

"It's by witchery!" Manger spat. "There are more blocks, Mayor Dodge, of kinds I do not know! They are seen, and appear glowing and even gold! Great gold blocks, solid and without dirt or stone! And diamond, too! Solid and pure, made of any nine the best of my collectionâ€"but they are not real!"

"So?" I shrugged. "What has that to do with finding this town?"

"Smithy!" Manger snapped. "Have you no value for purest ores?!"

"I value an answer to my question," was my response.

"Before I lost the last of my kindling, I struck it at the dirt, thinking to plant it in the dark, as if by miracle it might sprout as a tree," Manger replied. "I was not without light of any kind, but had found a lode of redstone, to kick."

"Kicking redstone helps your feet?" I wondered.

"It lights one's way, but not brightly, nor for long, as it fades," Manger said. "The fact is that there is much redstone in the lowest places, and I traveled away from lava by touching upon it. A great many things were slain, before the last world's end, Mayor. Many, many things which never saw the light of day!"

"Move on with your answer," I interrupted the mason.

"When no more redstone was near, I used a torch," Manger continued. "From that point, I ran back and forward, touching the ore and then reaching to the end of the torchlight to find more."

"And?" I prodded.

"And that stick, which I stuck into ancient dry dirt, caused the cursed blocks of purest kinds to show up!" Manger growled. "They showed, but only for a while, much like the redstone ore glowed and then faded. Always, they came in a line or in a corner, like so."

I watched the mason arrange three blocks in a corner fashion. He then placed two more blocks, equidistant, along either axis.

"This is the diamond block," Manger pointed to the corner block. "These others are gold at the corner, and sometimes gold far away, but sometimes they look like that strange glowing crystal which Balmy brought from the nether land."

"Those lit your way?"

"No, they showed, and they seemed bright, but they lit nothing else!" Manger stated with exasperation. "I did this, several times, and then I stepped off the distance. Finally, I guessed that this stayed in place because it was a corner of some kind. At first, I thought that the Spirit showed me its intent for me to build at this corner, and along those sides."

"What changed your mind?" I asked.

"The next corner made me see," Manger admitted. "Off in a tunnel, around and twisting it went, and then there were parts of the tunnel floor fallen away. That was a danger, of falling, but as I walked I also dug up ores. Digging out ores at one such place, I looked down and saw the place where I had been, a few hours earlier. The glow from lava, far down that way, showed that it was true. I had traveled in a circle, returning above whence I began."

"That must have been frustrating, I suppose," I remarked.

"It was, but then it was also a relief!" Manger said with a smile. "Finally, I had traveled for a while and knew where I was, relative to that corner! Little did I know that the corner was not down below me."

"It moved, to be where you were?"

"No, it stayed there, but it was not just there, Dodge," Manger was excited. "It was also all of the way up!"

"So that corner was down below, and you arrived back at it, above it, and found another part of the corner?"

"No, it does not exist!" Manger cackled a mirthless laugh. "None of those blocks exist, but they are real! They show when I use stick or spade within a boundary of those signs! Being above the lower place, when I struck stone again, those blocks showed in the higher tunnel, directly above the other place. In my mind, I finally saw that they went clear to the surface! That was their purposeâ€”to show the outline of the town's expanse!"

If this were true then such things would show constraints or boundaries of our works. It might also show the same boundaries of other works.

Manger and I set out to the town's south, the nearest gateway. Each of us took a stick among our usual sets of tools and weapons. We paused beyond the wall, at the top of the slope to the bench upon which Bogusville stood. I loosed the dogs to roam and to watch our for us.

"Do the honors," I said.

Manger touched the soil, whereupon gold blocks, ten meters apart, appeared beyond the south road. They stretched east and west to the corners of similar distance from the slope's foot. There, as described, I beheld blocks of pure diamond blue. I touched my stick to the wall.

"Behold!" Manger cried out a warning, pointing his stick at the ground in front of our feet.

Leaping sideways, sword coming to hand, I spun into a crouch at the ready. In front of Manger's feet, upon the very soil, I beheld writing in Spirit script.

"Why did you not warn of this witchery!?" I demanded.

"It was unseen, in the deep!" Manger gasped. "Surely, it was there, but I did not see it in the darkness...yet I ought. It glows green, like weakening potion which Juice concocts. It is not the magenta of Balmy's enchantments."

"You see Balmy's enchantments, in Spirit script?" I was astonished. "You did not see such things before, either of Balmy or of Juice."

"Before?" Manger blinked.

"Before your return from the balmy deep!" I snorted. "What other

witchery clings to you, adventurer?"

Manger looked again at the writing, but now it faded from view. We looked at the unreal boundary blocks, and they too faded away.

"Perhaps this is due to us both touching stick upon this land," Manger said.

I stood away, nodding for our mason to touch a stick to ground again. The same result came about.

"Very well, then it is not a danger, but a sign," I surmised.

"Are we constrained to build within these boundaries?" he wondered aloud.

We went to the marker blocks, and then touched stick to ground beyond that line. Turning about, we looked up to the watchtower, seeing Hrothgar watching us from on high. Our efforts had gained more attention, for each member of our town either stood upon the walls or approached our location. The very air about us seemed to thicken, presaging rain and shadows.

"Darkness falls!" Balmy sang out, from atop the gateway. "Hurry!"

I would say that we hurried, but more accurately we floundered. Great gushing rain bolted down from the darkness which thickened into a mouth-gaping cloudburst. Manger and I helped each other up the slope, and thankfully grasped poles extended to help us up.

The townsfolk wanted to bolt indoors, out of the deluge. The uncanny quickness of rain and descending darkness warned us to take careful steps.

"To the armory!" I shouted, not discussing anything in the roaring downpour.

"One moment!" our mason warned, pulling from his backpack three half-slabs of stone. "Now!"

Pushing Manger to the lead, we slogged over to the armory. At the door, before opening it inward, the mason laid the half-slabs across the way. They fit into a U shape, and blocked water from running into the armory.

Entering the small bunker which was the foundation of the watchtower, we all shook off our sodden clothing. Armor had saved me much of the swamping, for my helm, chestplate, and leggings had shed much water. My boots however had not saved my footings from being drenched, for the boots were not sealed.

The dogs wandered in the flooding rain, on guard for skeletons, which they attacked without delay. I heard them shaking off water and giving occasional barks of reassurance to each other.

The men took off clothing as I fired up the armory's stove. Clothing would be dried prior to going outside. The armory served also as a hardware and tool storage. Thus its chests held needful things for repairs, construction, and for battle.

Refuge in the armory was the purpose of our practiced response. Five years of survival and calamity had taught us to make way to the armory whenever the man on watch called out a warning.

"What is this!?" Bob demanded loudly, over the roar of the downpour. "What omen did you two trigger upon our heads?"

"Dress for battle!" I yelled back. "This is a presage of what awaits the workers which Lars said are on the way here!"

Unusual silence and somewhat sullen looks greeted my statement. Four men stood in their undergarments, donning dry apparel and untried armor. They had been caught unprepared, without heavy armor and with few weapons. I stood in a tight space, fully armored, armed, and prepared for what came, thus it may seem that I expected calamity to fall.

This was my habit, at whatever task, journey, or duty I fulfilled. It had once been the norm for each townsfolk, but time had enabled overconfidence.

"What about Hrothgar?" Balmy asked loudly.

"His arrows are useless, in this!" I replied. "He cannot see the walls, nor gates, and all torches not under cover are extinguished! Hrothgar must defend his lookout from whatever comes. We cannot see to move about and there is no internal access up to the tower."

"I say, we shall have to build siege rooms, like this, at the four corners, and at each gate!" Manger suggested. "We cannot always be near here if these rapid downpours come without warning!"

"Your hounds are weakening!" Bob called a warning. "The cold in the water are sapping their strength!"

Now, for once, everyone stared at the rancher. We knew that he knew what our animals experienced. More than that, though, factors about the environment had never effected animals so rapidly before this moment.

"What of the livestock!" Juice inquired. "Are things changed?!"

"And the villagers!" Balmy interjected.

"Nay, the hounds alone stand in the rain!" Bob gave a small smile. "Did you not know that efforts and battles and cold sapped their strength? It always has been thus!"

"Manger, can you open a window, opposite the door, so that I may feed dogs, or at least let them in for warmth?" I asked.

"Me? You can that, as well as anyone!" Manger laughed.

I moved through the tight confines of the armory, standing ready at the only door. If making a window opposite the door drew monsters to that opening, the dogs would not attack until something attacked us. That was their major weakness, for only if we attacked or were attacked would they leap into the fray. Except for skeletons, of course.

Three of the men glanced at me, then at Manger. The looks spoke well that my request made sense without explanation.

"What is your plan?" Juice inquired. "To the villies?"

"I should see to those!" Balmy interrupted. "My study time, in the spire, taught me something new! I want to try it, and now is a good time!"

"Now? Now is good?" I asked, perplexed. "Now is the worst of times to risk your neck for this!"

"Bah!" Balmy waved a vial of Juice's potions. "I can see perfectly well! Hrothgar also carries these, for vision at night!"

I nodded reluctantly. Most of us carried a few potions, just in case. This was just in case.

"We need to shrink the gateway opening to two meters!" Balmy stated. "There is a good reason, but trust me on this!"

"It is two meters, inside here!" I pointed out. "Whatever you do, this is that height!"

"You must go!" Bob shouted. "Feed your dogs!"

Not waiting for further discussion, conceding that Balmy should do as he wants, I nodded to the door. Without further delay, I took a swig from Balmy's jug, and dropped it upon the startled mage's feet.

The night vision potion rapidly swelled my pupils and yet it changed objects into bright reds and unusual colors. Everyone in the tight confines of the armory got a whiff of it, but Balmy was blanketed in fumes from the broken vial.

I flung open the door and thrust high with my sword. A dog stood in my way, and thus my sword stabbed above it, on purpose, and I lunged outward.

The dogs were on high alert, knowing that I was moving out on the attack by stabbing at things. Still, until I connected with something, they would not spring to the attack. Or unless something attacked me.

Clearing the way across the street for Balmy, I advanced to the repaired fence around the villagers. The dogs spread out, in all directions, watching without seeing much in the pouring rain.

"Can you climb over?!" I hollered, watching Balmy, and I saw that he changed direction away from the fence.

I glance upward, into the downpour, just to see if I could make out Hrothgar. In the pouring rain I could not even see the third floor of the tower, much less the top of it. The watchman would have to survive this without our aid, for the moment.

Taking advantage of the momentary lull, I grabbed meat from my pack and got to each of the dogs. I fed them, watching their drooping tails picking up. Food helped a beings spirit to lift, and I was glad

for Bob's warning.

"Stand away!" Balmy called out, but I scarcely heard his words. He sloshed in calf-deep water that pushed against the door of the decorations hut.

From what I could make out, Balmy was stacking up blocks of some sort. He attached other blocks to either side of the upper block, forming a T shape. Just as he was about to add a higher block, his dilemma increased. It was too tall for him to accomplish. He needed a step up.

"The planter!" I called, pointing to a planter at each corner of the hut. "Use the planter!"

Thwack!

An arrow ricocheted off from my helmet. I spun around, stepped sideways, and looked for the attacker! The night vision potion was wearing off!

A yell from above got my attention for just a moment. I kept moving, waiting for another arrow to come and betray the archer's position. All that I knew was that the archer was not in the direction of Balmy, where I had been looking when the arrow hit me.

Keeping my back towards Balmy, I sidled around the tower. My dogs likewise were on alert, searching for the enemy. That told me that the archer was not very near, and probably above the water.

Ping! Clang!

Two more arrows hit, and one of them stuck out of my right shoulder plate. The other ricocheted away, but now there were two archers attacking. A dog ran past me, heading towards the north gate. That was the direction of my right shoulder.

Moving ahead, putting the tower between me and the north gate, and whistled to get the dogs' attention. They would not come to me, but would orbit my new position, searching for the other archer.

The ground shook! Something beastly trod the town's streets! I heard the thud stomp even though the water was calf-deep.

"It works!" Balmy crowed happily.

I risked a glance towards him, but I could no longer see. Only darkness and hard roaring rain filled my awareness.

Thok!

An arrow slammed into my chestplate, knocking me backward! It thrust home, sticking into my chest through the armor!

My hands searched my backpack for a familiar vial, but found only some items in place where I always secured them. The ties were loosened, swelling in water, and the oilskin covering was no longer keeping items dry.

Floundering now, on my back in the rising flood, I rolled away.

Getting to my hands and knees, I heard a bark, and then another. My dogs were returning, apparently successful at killing the archers or driving them away. I heard one of them whining, as injured.

The pouring rain vanished, tapering away to a drizzle!

"Balmy!" I yelled. "Can you see?"

"No!" he responded. "It's okay! We have two golems on patrol!"

The news of golems inside of the town's walls did not reassure me. Thudding great footsteps came near, then stopped.

"Balmy!" Hrothgar's deep voice rang out. "What is that thing?!"

"It's a golem!" Balmy replied cheerily as he lit a torch. "Those will protect the villagers, from all attackers! No zombie can come near to them!"

In the flickering torchlight, I pulled out the arrow whose tip was cutting into my chest. Still upon my knees, now awash in water up to my pockets, I looked over my dogs. The injured one held away from me, over at the corner of the armory, as if apologizing for being hurt. It was too dark for me to make out the injury, at any distance, but I did not see an arrow. Perhaps the arrow had gone through without mortal injury.

"You need aid, as does your hound," Balmy stated, coming closer through the running waters. "We are not done with this night, but just beginning."

"They must be above us!" I growled hotly. "They cannot spawn in waters! They are on the rooftops, and in second story arches!"

We both turned as I rose to my feet. Flaming arrows were shooting out of the tower's third story. Hrothgar had found his range, and the rains did not snuff out his arrows.

"Another thing!" Balmy chortled as he led the way over to the armory. "We each must secure lighting in our quarters and quadrants that will not go out!"

"Yea, and doorways above the flood!" I agreed, going past the armory to kneel at my injured pooch. With a bowed head in thanks to Our Lord and King, I gave aid to the wounded animal.

"You have too few of those, for the town's good," Balmy mentioned, standing at the armory doorway, looking around with his torch held high.

"Not I, but you!" was my quick reply. "Each of you are unguarded, whether or not I give you permissions to aid and feed my dogs. They exist in bonds to me, but none of you have guardians."

"Would you have two dozen hounds patrolling the streets?" Balmy laughed. "We need only have a villager encased at each corner, and the golems will patrol to keep them safe."

"Like it kept me safe, just now?" shaking my head said no. "They are

dogs for the villagers, but only when attacked or when a zombie comes near. That one did nothing to guard me, nor to find the archers that attacked me."

Balmy's silence admitted the truth.

"For each monster there is an anti-dote, as Cortez learned," I said. "Cats deter bangers. Dogs attack skeletons. Now, golems defend primarily against zombies, but we do not venture forth with cats and golems on leashes. Dogs alone bond to your lives, attacking whatever you attack or that which attacks you. The lone exception is that they never attack bangers, for which I lost two of the brutes in running battles."

Not one of the men argued against the logic. It was increasingly a deadly world in which we lived.

"I have too few townsfolk to risk losing you!" I emphasized, opening the door to the armory. "Any one of you is too much to lose. We already lack a carpenter, and decorator, a dedicated cook, a farmer, and others. We talked about this, after Cortez was killed. I have offered housing to the miller's party."

"That's about time," Juice and Bob said, together.

"Were it feasible, I would move this town to Derringer!" I continued, ignoring the interruption. "That would be so that he might teach us to be as formidable as he has become. Greater evils are loosed to draw men down to unbelief against Our Lord."

The statement brought a moment's pause. The men looked to me, to explain what I had just said.

"The end of this age is not the only rebellion," I said. "We saw that it happened, where Bogusville was translated away. That is minor rebellion, perhaps, but we lost focus on the written Word. It said that many nations would suffer drought and other judgments because of leaders refusing to worship in Our Lord in truth, and refusing tithes, and honors, and to enforce his decrees.

"My offer, to the miller's group, included supplying them food and more," I kept on speaking. "That is in order that they may labor to feed the suffering peoples of those downcast leaders. We should not feed the judgment people because we already were withdrawn. We are prepared to flood the locales with livestock, but we were withdrawn. The millers are conscripted, which is not the same as the Spirit withdrawing them from action, but perhaps it is. I do not know."

"It surely seems withdrawn," Juice stated. "Conscripts are withdrawn in order to do dedicated works for Our Lord and King. They cannot be turned aside, lest we incur judgment for doing so."

The apothecary's warning hung in the wet air.

"Do you think that is cause for what is now happening?" I asked.

I shed my chestplate in order to bare the arrow's wound. Pulling aside my under tunic, I saw the flesh healing but my health was not restored. Standing still, I let Juice apply salve and give me potion to drink.

"Another thing!" Balmy repeated, somewhat belatedly. "We need diamonds! Lots of diamonds!"

"Because?" Manger stared directly at the thaumaturge.

"Armor! This paltry iron armor would not have defended our mayor!" Balmy put a hand to his own armor, which he had gained from the armory chests. "That arrow is a perfect example. It pierced his diamond chestplate! Others did not, but what if he had worn this iron armor, instead of his enchanted armor? Right now, we would be appointing a new mayor."

There, another truth was laid bare. The battlefield realities escalated, even while we talked about such things.

My armor, which was all encased in enchanted diamond, had served me well on the trip to regain my dogs. I had suffered minor injuries. Several times I had come close to being mobbed by monsters, but the dogs had rallied to me. The fact was that my armor survived three days and nights of battles. The certainty, now, was that the weapons of the foe were escalating.

"How much of this escalation is because of dogs?" I asked. "You want to know, as do I, but what would we have done without them, tonight?"

"I am more concerned with the seasonal weather, right now, than about your dogs attracting trouble," Balmy stated.

"You say weather, as if this will repeat," I responded.

"This is seasonal, meaning that we are not in a stable region," Balmy explained his reasoning. "All regions are fixed climates, always following patterns by day and week, but this seems different. Except for judgment, the weather pattern should be cyclical, unchanging. For nine days, we had daily and nightly rains, except for twice. Now, we have a downpour unlike anything outside of a jungle climate."

"Are we incurring judgment?" Bob asked. "That is the first question, Mayor Dodge, is whether this region or this town is under judgment?"

"Agreed," I said, to both men. "Let us pray."

The attitude of prayer always began with being penitent. Without repentance there would be no actual prayer, but a pretense. Having lived for years on the edge of a judgment zone, we six had reason to stay penitent lest the judgment spread into our lives. Prayer was almost as constant as being thankful for every mercy and blessing and correction.

Tonight's prayer brought five of us together, and promptly we left the armory and went up to Hrothgar. Restarting our communion, with all six of us, and the dogs on watch all around, we became penitent and sought guidance from Our Lord and King.

The downpours renewed, unrelenting, for at least an hour, and then faded again. We stayed constant, in prayer.

For the remainder of the night, until after the sun should have risen, we stayed in prayerful waiting. The monsoons renewed, faded, and renewed again. By mid-morning, waters surrounded Bogusville unto the horizons. Forests and hills stood out of the water. The flat watery expanse warmed in the noon sunlight.

"Well, would you look at that?" Manger said, and he pointed down to the north gate. "Remember that sinkhole that swallowed me, one week ago? It's acting like a great drain hole, in a sink!"

"That is happening, more or less everywhere," Juice intoned. "There could be hundreds of such open caves, particularly in the low hills, where waters have never flooded."

"Openâ€"now," Manger responded. "The dirt covering the mouths of caves will be washed away, swallowed into their gullets."

"Wow!" Bob gasped, pointing over towards the north of Westmount. "What has become of the lake, for the milling works?"

"Good heavens," Manger said quietly. "The northern wall must have given way, and it washed down around north of that rise, taking all the dirt and trees in its path."

I watched silently as our group walked around the high watchtower and looked over the flood damages. Westmount had shed its waters in all directions, but we had no vantage point to see the brunt of damages to its west. The Mill Creek was no longer fed by the reservoir, but only by receding waters draining from the lands nearby.

"Our bridge, over Mill Creek, stands still," Hrothgar mentioned. "That is a bit of wonder, for all the water in the town walls exited through the two gateways, north and south. We have no drainage system, for it wasn't needed until now, but I suspect that the southward embankment is much damaged."

"So is the west," Balmy stated, looking past his house. "That mountainside had to have washed clean away, between Westmount and our town's farm. See all that barren stone? It was covered with soil and a few trees, yesterday."

"Look, at the lowest milling house!" Bob said worriedly. "There is a stream of mud, coming from that lowest doorway, covering the road apron."

I went down to the fourth floor, and then lower, until I could reasonably make out almost every nook and cranny of our town. Predictably, there were mobs springing into existence, lacking anywhere else to be.

"Hrothgar, your watch is over!" I called up the stairwell.

"Nay! I could not count heads, this day!" Hrothgar roared with laughter. "Ye had me distracted, with praying and repenting! I know not where the working men have gone!"

"Let's go," I said. "I shall find out if my guests, at the inn, slept well."

"Go?" Balmy called down. "Go where? Our shops are secure, but unused,

and we need affix torches and lights, but the water has swept our town cleaner than before. It is too swamped for us to go beyond the walls!"

"Suit yourself, then," I said.

Ignoring the others, I walked down to the street and set about clearing monsters from our town. My dogs were more than eager to take several bites out of the intruding monsters. I focused on entirely killing any bangers, but the other mobs I either hit in passing or shot with an arrow, and the dogs finished the job.

When I went around the inn, it seemed that mobs had disappeared. Under the archway, no mobs lurked, but then I discovered that the east door was open. The monsters gained access into the lower two rooms on the east. Going inside, I discovered more than a few monsters. The torches were gone, leaving two large dark rooms and a dark hallway for monsters to spawn. Try as I might, the mob of monsters pushed me back out the entry door.

"Troubles, Mayor?" Lars asked, coming out of the main door.

"You have the day off?" I responded, kicking another monster back and killing it with my sword.

Most of my dogs were busy inside, killing the monsters that had attacked me. In a minute, there should be room to fight my back into the rooms.

"That is strange," Lars commented, searching about with a sword in hand. "The engineers and helpers took off to fix a breach at the reservoir. Then another of the monsoons came. The last monsoon cloudburst."

My question went unanswered. I reopened the door, stabbing in high, and a small zombie villager came running out under my thrust.

Lars tagged the little attacker with a nice downward slash. He did it again, as soon as the creature came upright after being knocked down. It died.

I placed torches onto the entry hall walls, lighting the way. The doors to both lower rooms stood open, and I heard several zombies milling about at the east end. They were trying to get at the villagers, one building over.

"Banger!" Lars called out, pulling me back as a banger came out from the right hand doorway.

"Together now!" I surged forward.

Lars and my swords slashed the creeper against the wall, pinning and killing it on the spot. I put torches into the room on the right, from whence it had come out.

"Closing in!" Lars called from the hallway. "I'll take the left!"

I heard the outside door close, as Lars had signaled. While I happily slashed at two zombies in this room, Lars apparently found more in the other room. Dogs came to me, for they were not bonded to Lars,

nor would the help him.

"C'mere!" I whispered to my pets, and fed them overly much.

Within moments I had two puppies to feed and nourish. With that, I devoted two of the adults to Lars, and off they went.

"Hah!" Lars shouted with mixed irritation and surprise.

I laughed at the sounds of Lars' dogs taking over the slaying. My own quartet of canines, now two elders and two pups, circle about, wanting to find monsters.

"Lars!" I called out, sensing the completion of his work. "Have you noticed any belongings of the miller's party, in these rooms?"

"Nay!" he replied, after a moment. "We carry our purse and goods in packs, lest we not come back."

"Exactly so," I said easily, picking up dropped items from slain monsters as I crossed the hallway. "Therefore these monsters did not slay them during the last few moments before our arrival."

"Slay them?" Lars turned away from the fading corpses of the monsters. He got a spade and some articles of leather gear dropped by the losers.

"Do you suppose that they just left the doors open, both outside and at these rooms, when they departed?" I probed.

"No, of course not," Lars admitted, now becoming intrigued. "Neither did they call upon me to aid in repairs."

"Perhaps they could not call upon anyone, Mister Bricklayer."

Lars stood shaking his head, denying the possibility.

"Here," I passed over an iron ingot, to Lars. "The first drop of a mob, since the Spirit assigned you to this town. Now, save that rotten flesh, for your pack of dogs, as it is time for you to breed those two."

"Why?" Lars asked. "Why do you think that the miller's engineers are killed? Or that I have been tasked to Bogusville?"

"These rains," I answered, adding torches to room and hallway. "You said that your preparation was for building many such milling sites. Ben, the Miller, said the same thing. You said ten days time remained, but he spoke of finishing and leaving. I would guess that they have departed, one way or another."

Lars hurried to catch up, but feeding his new pup's health to fullness kept him busy by the inn. The dogs often would not stay still, demanding to be loose on the hunt.

"Let us say that you are both correct," I continued, walking around the archway and relighting torches. "Let us reason that the Spirit called the miller's party to do repairs, up at the reservoir. But for what? There are no supplies of grain with which to feed the milling

machines, to make flour for bread and cakes. Even the nutritionist never set foot beyond those mills, to asses our gardens and fields for ingredients. Everything that is used to build those things came supplied by the Spirit, in those chests. True?"

"True," Lars admitted, watching his dogs search for foes.

"Then, for what purpose place the chests and milling work here, without using anything of this region, other than a manmade reservoir?" I prodded. "Miller was fine with teaching me to be the baker, the chef, the laborer, and whatever else came to mind...but he singled out you to become the millwright."

"Me!?" Lars was astonished.

"It was my idea to name you as millwright, but he did not deny it," I said. "Nor did any man in his company! You were held separate, and they held off from accepting my offer of citizenship, in Bogusville. You returned home; they denied belonging here."

"I am to be millwright?" Lars was still unable to believe the sudden change.

"There is another way for you to asses what happens," I explained. "These are just rainstorms, Lars."

"Hardly!" Lars laughed. "That was a flood, fit to sail great ships!"

"Aye, perhaps, but sail from where?" was the question.

"What? You're serious?" the new millwright asked.

"That rain is serious, but not fit for this locale," I observed. "It is normal for a different region entirely."

"Jungles!" Lars shouted in surprise. "The jungles have such monsoons!"

"Yea, that is so, therefore if these rains tested the fabric on workmanship, at that reservoir, what did it prove?" my smile spoke my opinion.

"That they are not ready to build flour mills in jungles, I guess," Lars admitted with some undefinable regret.

"Or mills for any other purpose, in monsoon regions," I nodded. "There was in that miller a geyser of pride, when we spoke. I'm of the mind that humility is better to chew upon than having to swallow it after crowing."

"Do you think that repairing the damages will shrink his pride?" Lars asked so quietly that his nervousness was plain.

"You are not betraying anyone by speaking honestly," I promised. "To your question, I will say this: If you repair and operate that milling industry, then five of us may be called to provide ways, means, grains, mules and packs."

"That is an awfully big labor to take upon the town, Uncle Dodge."

I nodded, but it was not as large of a commitment as the Spirit was already calling the townsfolk to perform . There was much more to be done, to achieve, and to sacrifice.

The way ahead was hidden in fog. Circumstances could be clues. Faith was the coin of trade, no matter the direction of progress.

Praying constantly, silent but for my own mind and the Spirit to hear, I went off to survey the extent of terrain changed by the flood.

End
file.